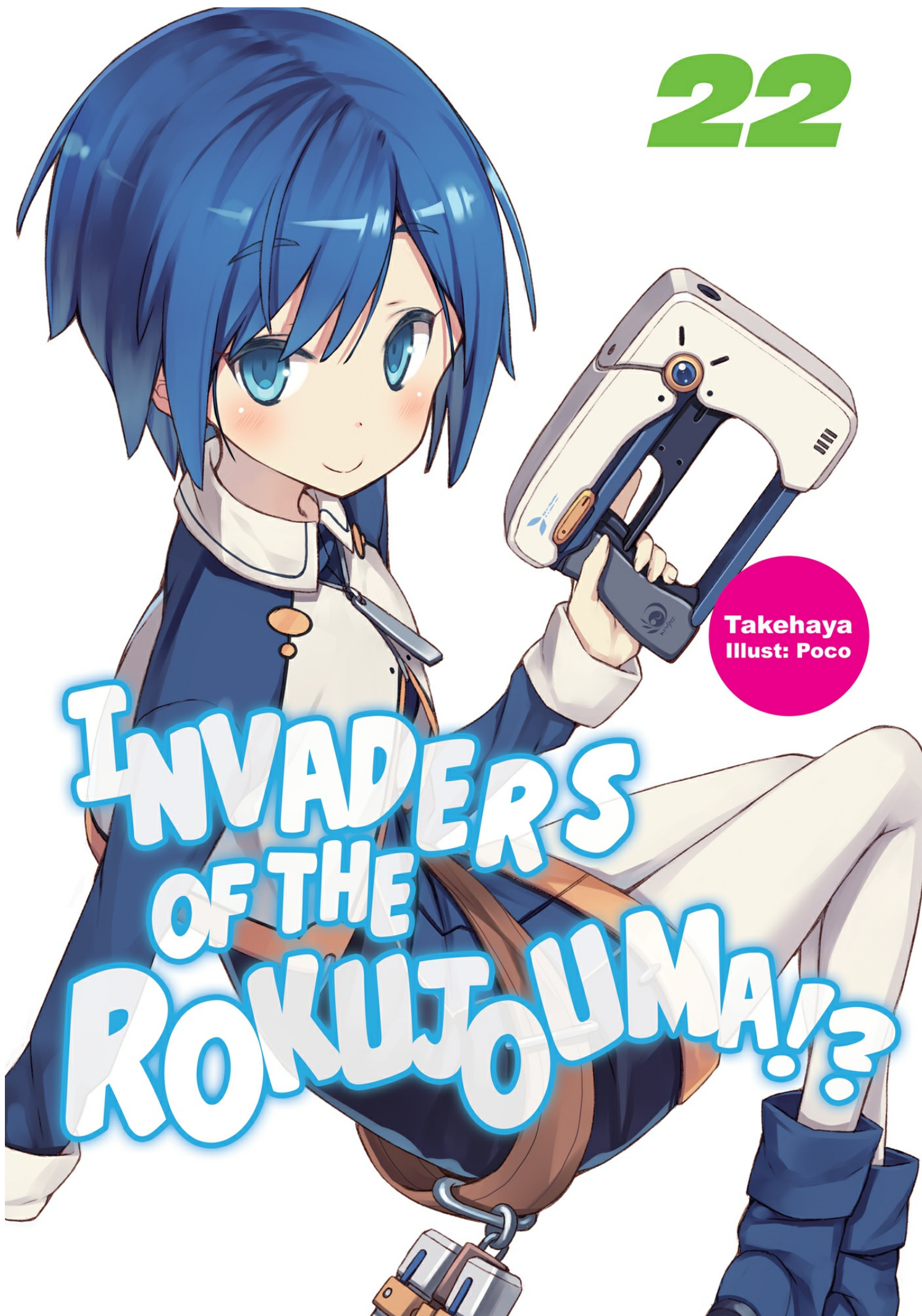


22

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

INVADERS OF THE ROKUTUMA!?



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? 22
THE GOLDEN PRINCESS AND THE BLUE KNIGHT



**AFTER TWO THOUSAND YEARS,
IT'S BACK TO THE PARDOMSHIHA TERRITORY!**





**“F-
FATHER?!”**

**“I’VE
CERTAINLY
CAUSED YOU A
GOOD BIT OF
TROUBLE,
PARDOMSHIHA.
DID YOU GET
ANY MORE
GRAY
HAIRS?”**

**“MY, MY.
GIRLS
REALLY DO
CHANGE
WHEN THEY
FALL IN
LOVE.”**

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STUDENTS OF KISSHOUHARUKAZE HIGH SCHOOL



KASAGI SHIZUKA

Unquestionably strong.
Koutarou's classmate and the
landlord of Corona House.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's childhood
and best friend.



SAKURABA HARUMI

The president of the knitting
society that Koutarou joins.
She's one year his senior,
and a little sickly.



SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the
formal tenant of room 106.
Also the Blue Knight.



**UNDERGROUND
DWELLERS**

KURANO KIRIHA

A crafty woman who pretended to be
plotting to invade the surface while
searching for the person she loved.

RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE

INVADERS OF THE ROKUJOUMA!? FACTIONS MAP

MAIN BODY



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. She currently lives together with Shizuka.



GHOSTS



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghost girl haunting room 106, reborn into the land of the living.



NIJINO YURIKA

A girl who came to warn about the dangers of room 106. Turns out she's an actual magical girl.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHOR

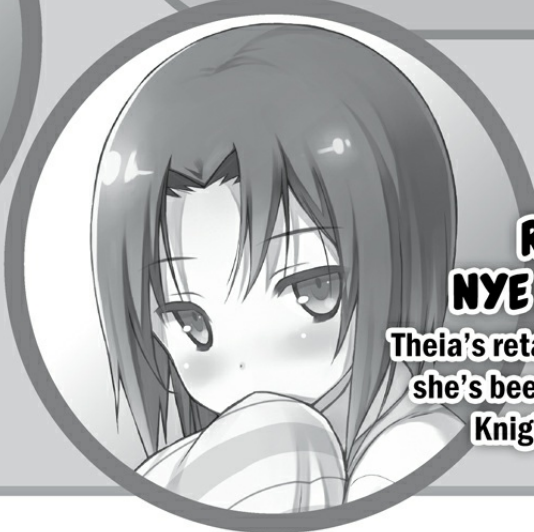
A princess who came from outer space as part of a trial for imperial succession. Currently in exile alongside her mother.



**CLARIOSSA
DAORA FORTHOR**

A former rival princess to Theia. Lately, Koutarou's been relying on her whenever something comes up.

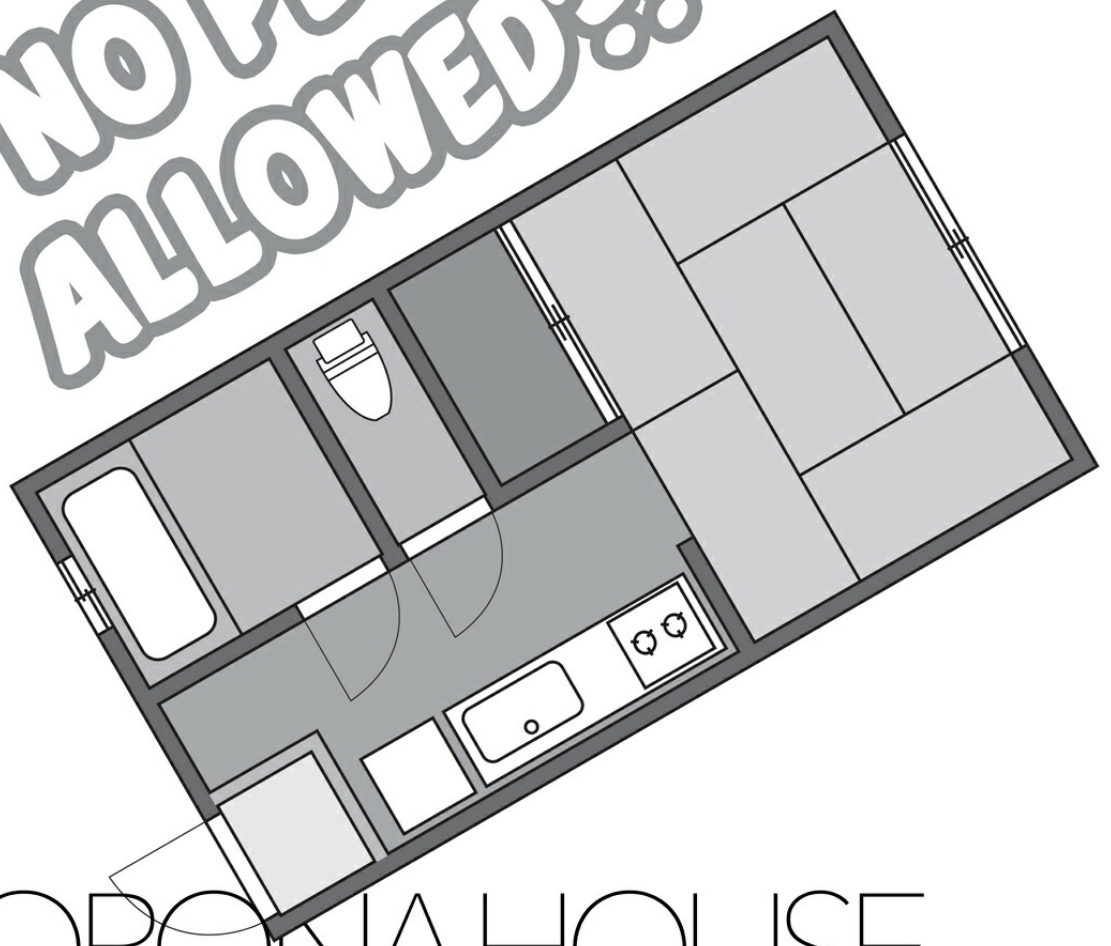
ALIENS



**RUTHKANIA
NYE PARDOMSHIHA**

Theia's retainer and assistant. Lately, she's been training under the Blue Knight, who she admires.

NO PETS
ALLOWED?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

The Meteor's Whereabouts

Saturday, November 20th

Planet Alaia was the sixth planet from the sun in the Forthorthian solar system. It was originally a barren wasteland devoid of life, but as the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire entered its space age, Alaia was terraformed to support civilization.

As it was the first planet in the solar system to be terraformed, however, a great deal of its landscape was simplistic. The same was true for its ecosystem, which hosted only select types of flora and fauna. Only the bare minimum had been brought to Alaia, primarily plants to generate breathable air and farm animals to feed the people.

As a result, Alaia looked similar to how one might imagine a pastoral countryside. Though its population had grown significantly over the years, bringing new plants and animals to the planet as trade expanded, Alaia was still rather simple. It would most likely take another thousand years or more before it truly developed a unique ecosystem of its own. But little did its people know that a strange group was about to show up and delay things a bit. Indeed, they came riding in on a blue meteor.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah! Noooooooooo!”

The meteor screamed as it crashed into the ground and threw up dirt for dozens of meters before finally coming to a stop. Though the destruction wasn't all that catastrophic, it would likely take several years for the land to recover. Once stopped, however, the meteor in question lost its blue glow. Only then did its true nature become apparent—said blue meteor was actually a boy and two girls.

“Ow, ow, ow... I-I thought I was going to die...”

“Move over, will you, Koutarou? I really am gonna die.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You did good.”

Indeed, the meteor consisted of Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika. Their descent to Alaia with the group had gone awry, and the three friends were sucked into atmospheric re-entry outside of Ohime. It was a very dangerous situation, but they’d managed to put their powers together and land safely enough.

“Are you okay, Theia?”

“Of course I am; you protected me. What about you?”

“I’m fine too. I’m not hurt... though it doesn’t look like I can say the same about the armor.”

“Heh, all that matters is that you’re safe. The armor can be replaced.”

“P-Please worry about me too, you guysh!”

Koutarou and Theia smiled at each other and swiftly stood up to pull out Yurika, whose face had been rather ungracefully planted right in the dirt. Fortunately, none of them were seriously injured. The worst hit they’d taken was Yurika’s bruised nose, which was a blessing. They were all well enough to keep moving.

“Waaah, that was scary... I thought we were gonna die...”

“We’re fine now, so calm down, okay?”

“I don’t believe you! Even if you say that we’re fine, I won’t believe you anymore!”

“Okay, okay, I get it... Just turn this way for a sec. Your face is a mess.”

“Okay.”

Really, the biggest thing they had to worry about was Yurika’s mental state. But as Koutarou wiped her face, she gradually calmed down and returned to her normal self.

“But still... to think we’d be okay after falling all this way...”

While Koutarou was tending to Yurika, Theia raised a hand to protect her eyes and looked up into the sky. Hearing what she said, Yurika turned to look Theia’s

way.

“Is all of Forthorthian space that terrible?” she asked.

“Like I said, that was the upper layer of the atmosphere. Most planets with people on them have the one.”

“Whaaat?! You’ve gotta be kidding! If all the planets have that, wouldn’t spaceships just break apart?!”

“They’re made sturdily to avoid that.”

“Really?”

“Strictly speaking, no. They’re actually protected by barriers. Moreover, they fly by controlling inertia and gravity. Their re-entry speed is much slower, so there’s not as much heat.”

“See?! I’m sure that it only happens here!”

“Theia, don’t make it any more complicated than it already is...”

“Heh, sorry.”

Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika had fallen from orbit without a spaceship. Under normal circumstances, any unprepared human would have burned up like a shooting star in the atmosphere. The fact that they’d lived to tell the tale with only minor scratches and burns wasn’t just the result of combining their powers—it was also an extraordinary stroke of good luck. It was a situation so grim and terrible that Yurika simply preferred to think it was only possible here on Alaia.

“Too bad things are only going to get more dangerous from here on out...”

As Koutarou finished wiping off Yurika’s face, Theia’s smile faded as she began explaining the situation with a serious expression and tone of voice. Seeing and hearing her like that, Yurika and Koutarou’s expressions naturally grew tense in response.

“What comes next, Theia?”

“The enemy is most likely on their way as we speak. The Imperial Army surely knows that we’ve landed in the area, so if we waste too much time here, we’ll be surrounded before we know it.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Don’t be so loud, Yurika. What will you do if the enemy hears you?”

“S-Sorry...”

“It’s fine. Now follow me, you two.”

Though the three of them had safely made it to the surface, they were still in danger. Right now their top priority was to clear out of the area before the Imperial Army arrived.

In addition to the capital planet of Forthorthe, the Forthorthian solar system consisted of seven other planets, each of which was overseen by one of the seven royal families. That was in addition to the territory they held on Planet Forthorthe. Essentially, each royal family had vast amounts of land and people under their control. Some of the royal families even governed additional planets in the far reaches of the empire.

As one might guess based on the local support for Elfaria, Planet Alaia was under direct control of the Mastir family. As such, Theia knew a good deal about the planet, its people, and its landscape—political or otherwise. And thanks to that, she knew exactly where they would be able to lay low.

“Let’s hide out here for a while.”

“Shouldn’t we be trying to meet up with Kiriha-san and the others as soon as possible?”

“We’ve only just arrived, so the Imperial Army will begin their search for us. It’s dangerous to be on the move right now.”

While they didn’t know who exactly, someone had undoubtedly seen where the blue meteor landed. It was only a matter of time before the Imperial Army sent troops to apprehend anyone who’d entered the planet illegally. Thanks to that, security would be tight in the area for a while. But as time passed, the army would expand their search radius and move on assuming that Theia and her entourage had escaped. The lighter scrutiny would then make it easier to escape for real, meaning that waiting was by far the safer option. Theia, however, was still anxious.

If that pilot reports in, there's a chance the army will never relent... Hahh, but nothing will come from fretting about it now...

If the pilot Theia had saved reported to his superiors that he'd sighted the princess herself, the number of troops the army sent to the area would likely double. That would put Theia, Koutarou, and Yurika in extreme danger, but it wasn't like they could make a move now regardless. Moreover, Theia didn't regret saving the pilot. So she put her worries aside for now and resolved herself to deal with the consequences if the time came.

"So, Theia, what is this place?"

Koutarou craned his neck and looked around. Theia had brought him and Yurika to a building half hidden underground so that it didn't stand out in the forest where it was located. Part of the structure was collapsed, and the rest was covered in moss and ivy. It was clear at a glance that the building hadn't been used in many years, but the dilapidation made it hard to tell what it had originally been used for.

"This building was constructed in the initial stages of Alaia's development. It was a forward base for the afforestation project, which, as you can tell, was a success. After that it fell out of use and was eventually used as a hideout for anti-government radicals. As the planet continued to develop, however, they moved on to a different location."

"So a former afforestation base and a radical hideout, huh? This place sure has one heck of a history."

"That's why we have so much data on it."

As the Mastir family had been in charge of terraforming Alaia, they had more geographical data on the planet than anyone else—and that included the Imperial Army, which had only established a foothold on the planet later. Theia used that information to pick out a couple of hiding places, and had settled on this one because she was sure the military didn't even know it existed.

"Then does that means that we're safe for a while?! We can rest here, right?!"

"That's right."

“Pheeew, thank god!”

With a heavy sigh of relief, Yurika plopped down a large cement block. She’d been on edge ever since they’d landed on the planet, so she slumped over in an exhausted fashion now that she could finally sit down and relax a little. It didn’t look like she’d be getting up any time soon.

“You can rest easy. They won’t find us here. Not right away, anyway.”

The building was completely disguised by the surrounding forest, and completely camouflaged by the moss and ivy that now covered it. It was also old enough that it shouldn’t be on any of the Imperial Army’s maps. So, barring a stroke of terrible luck, Theia was confident they’d be safe here for at least a little while.

With some downtime, Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika decided to have a meal while they rested. The menu, however, was a simple one. All the food they had consisted of what Koutarou was carrying in his armor and what Theia had stored in Star Purple—calorie-dense rations and instant coffee.

“Thank you for the foood!”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Let’s dig in.”

That said, not one of them had any complaints. They were grateful to have any food at all and happily ate what they had. They all knew what kind of situation they were in, and their stomachs were quite empty after everything they’d been through. But on the subject of food, Koutarou’s thoughts took an expected turn.

“I gotta say, Theia... your table manners have become thoroughly Japanese.”

Indeed, Koutarou was reflecting on how Theia’s manners had changed. He was able to appreciate the difference because he’d picked up on Forthorthian manners while he was in the past, and he found it rather amusing that Theia had only fully made the transition now that they were back in Forthorthe.

“That may be... I did spend a long time in Japan, after all.”

Once Koutarou pointed it out, Theia realized it for herself and cracked a smile. She was aware that she'd been changing, but being able to see it so clearly for herself was amusing.

"Just make sure you don't use Japanese table manners at any political dinners, you hear?"

"I would never do that. Honestly, I'm more worried about you, Koutarou."

"Me? Why?"

When the conversation turned on Koutarou all of a sudden, his eyes opened wide in surprise. As if directing an orchestra, Theia pointed a finger at him with great purpose.

"If you act too much like a Forthorthian, they'll figure out that you're the Blue Knight."

Theia wanted to keep Koutarou's identity a secret, but she also wanted the world to know. Those two feelings were in constant conflict in her heart. Knowing that, Koutarou broke into a smile again.

"It's funny to hear you say that, you know."

"Why?"

"You're the one who put me through such rigorous training."

"Heh, that's true."

The person responsible for beating etiquette and manners into Koutarou was none other than Theia herself. So hearing her tell him to abandon them now was quite strange. It was funny, even. And, recognizing how it embodied the feelings butting heads inside her, Theia couldn't help but see the humor in the situation too.

"We'll both have to be careful not to show the habits we've picked up."

"Yeah. Let's be mindful."

After the two of them shared a good laugh together, the conversation reached a natural lull. And with no one in particular saying anything, the mood gradually turned somber. The gravity of the situation at hand simply wouldn't

allow them to continue lighthearted chatter forever.

“So, Theia, what do we do from here? About regrouping with Elle and the others, I mean.”

Rendezvousing with the rest of their party was their top priority. They would never be able to protect Forthorthe with their strength divided.

“Normally, I’d like to establish communications first. But in this situation, that’s practically suicide.”

“Yeah... We can’t use radio or gravitational waves, and since Elexis is involved, we can’t use magic or spiritual energy either.”

To establish communications, they’d need to broadcast a signal of some kind. But the moment they did that, the Imperial Army would come knocking en masse.

“And if comms are out of the question, so are gates.”

“We’d probably be surrounded by drones long before we actually got one set up and ready for human use.”

For similar reasons, a gate—like the one Theia and Ruth used to travel instantly between room 106 and Blue Knight—would be equally dangerous. It would take at least an hour to set it up and establish a connection that was safe for human travel, but by that time, the Imperial Army would be on top of them. The army could have a gate capable of sending unmanned crafts up and running before Theia and the others ever had a prayer of escaping through theirs. There was a similar problem relying on Yurika as well. Though magical, her teleportation spells still bent space, making them detectable by the Imperial Army.

“Which means we’ll be escaping by foot. We’ll set out at dark.”

Without a way to reach her allies, Theia couldn’t rely on anyone for help. That meant she, Koutarou, and Yurika would need to escape on their own—that was the conclusion she’d reached.

“Shouldn’t we hurry, though?”

They of course wanted to meet up with the rest of their group as soon as

possible. That's why Koutarou thought it would be better to set out soon rather than waiting around for nightfall. Theia's strategy perplexed him.

"I would love to, but there are likely satellites and unmanned aircraft still in the area. It would be difficult to escape their eyes during the day."

Theia ultimately felt the same way Koutarou did, but she knew the dangers of rushing things. The aerial surveillance network the army had undoubtedly established would inevitably spot them if they set out while optical observation was still viable.

"So it would be better to flee at night when they can't see, huh?"

"Yes... but even then, there's still a risk."

"What are you talking about?"

"Infrared cameras."

"But don't the animals in the forest give off heat signatures and stuff too?"

"This is an artificial forest, so it's not home to many large animals. And there's a good chance the army will only be investigating larger heat signatures."

"So we'll need to find a real forest. Preferably a deep one."

"That's right."

Optical cameras wouldn't be worth much at night, but infrared cameras and heat sensors would still be fully operational. And Koutarou was right—as long as there were other significant heat signatures in the forest, a few humans wouldn't stand out immediately. But alas, a good deal of Alaia's wooded areas had been created artificially. They lacked the biodiversity of the natural forests, especially in terms of larger animals. That meant Theia and the others would have to get to a natural forest in order to blend in.

A deep forest would also afford them extra protection in the way of dense tree cover. The infrared cameras couldn't see through obstacles, so keeping behind or under something was a reliable way to avoid detection.

"However, the army knows all this, so they likely already have additional personnel and aircrafts watching the deeper parts of the forests."

“I see. That is... rather troublesome.”

Koutarou now realized Theia’s dilemma and racked his brain over what to do. Rather than forging ahead without any contingencies, it would be best to have at least one backup plan in place. And when it came to backup, the first person Koutarou thought of was...

“Yurika.”

“Hwah?”

Upon suddenly hearing her name, Yurika looked up with her mouth full of food and a confused expression on her face. She’d been so focused on eating that she hadn’t been paying much attention at all to Theia and Koutarou’s conversation.

“Can’t you use your magic to hide our temperatures?”

“It’s not like I can’t... But how long are we talking?”

While she didn’t understand why Koutarou was asking, Yurika did indeed have a spell that could disguise the temperature of an object or person. She’d learned it during her training as a magical girl because it was extremely useful on stealth missions.

“Theia, how far away are we from our destination?”

“Let’s see... Since we’re on foot, it’ll probably take three or four days to get there.”

Koutarou’s armor, Signaltin, and Theia’s Combat Dress were all virtually out of steam at this point. Moreover, since Theia had cut Star Purple loose during reentry, she had only the bare bones of her equipment left. As a result, they didn’t have anything to spare in the way of resources or gear. (If they had, then Yurika probably wouldn’t have had to land on her face.) But without anything else to rely on, they’d be making their escape on foot.

For the time being, their immediate goal was to get to safety somewhere Elfaria’s faction had influence. They’d set their sights on a city about a hundred kilometers away. Moving at full speed, it would take a minimum of two days to get there. Travelling at a more realistic speed to conserve their energy and

stamina, however, it would be a three or four day journey.

“So count on four nights, Yurika. Can you do it?”

“If it were for just me, I could. But it’ll be hard with the three of us.”

The spell Yurika knew to disguise temperature was an intermediate-tier spell that wasn’t suited for use over extended periods of time. Yurika was born with an exceptional capacity for mana, but it would be no mean feat to keep a spell like that up for hours on end.

“Besides, I’ll also need to conceal my mana so Darkness Rainbow doesn’t find us. I don’t think I’ll last more than two hours with the three of us...”

Even if they hid their temperature with magic, Darkness Rainbow could detect mana usage and the traces it left behind. That meant Yurika would have to cast a second spell in order to conceal her magic, which would in turn drain her mana twice as fast. And that was for each person she cast the spell on. In other words, covering for all three of them, she’d be using six times the mana she would need just to cover herself. She would be able to make it a full half a day on her own, but when she divided her power between Theia, Koutarou, and herself, they were looking at a couple of hours of use at best.



“If we can only travel for two hours a day, the trip will take ten. We’ll never make it out of here at that rate.”

After running the numbers in her head, Theia realized it would be impossible. In addition to everything else pressuring them, she knew they didn’t have any time to spare. Taking too long to get to safety would be a fatal mistake.

“I’m sorry... I wish I was a more amazing magical girl...”

Yurika still didn’t really know what was going on, but she knew it was serious based on the way Theia and Koutarou were behaving. And upon realizing that she couldn’t help, she drooped her shoulders and lowered her head.

“Too bad... I guess we’ll have to proceed without relying on magic.”

“Yeah...”

“I’m sorry... I’m really sorry...”

The brainstorming seemed to grind to a halt there. A sudden flash of brilliance on Koutarou’s part, however, reignited the conversation.

“Wait a minute... Yeah! Hey, Yurika!”

“Hwah?!”

“We don’t have to completely disguise our body heat! We just need to shrink our signatures and make it look like we aren’t human! Can you do that?”

“That’s right! Excellent thinking, Koutarou!”

Theia quickly caught on to Koutarou’s plan and cracked a glorious smile. Yurika had said she’d only last two hours if she cast a spell to negate their heat signatures. And that would be necessary if they were trying to sneak into a base that was prepared to intercept any and all intruders—but that wasn’t the case here. In the forest, they were only trying to blend in with the local fauna. That meant that rather than negating their heat signatures altogether, they only needed to reduce them—which should also reduce the amount of mana Yurika needed to cast the spell to do it, which would in turn make it that much harder for Darkness Rainbow to detect it.

“What do you mean?”

Only coming in on the latter half of the discussion, however, Yurika looked at her friends quizzically and cocked her head to the side. Realizing she was lost, Koutarou placed both hands on her shoulders and tried to explain things in a way she could understand.

“At night, the Imperial Army will try and find us by our heat signatures. They’ll probably use infrared cameras and heat sensors to scan the forest, but they’ll filter out anything that doesn’t appear to be human because the forest is full of animals. You follow?”

“I think so.”

“All right, so what happens if we shrink our heat signatures to half their normal size?”

“They would... filter us out?”

“Bingo! We’ll make the army think we’re just some dogs or cats walking around!”

“Aha!”

Yurika clapped her hands together in a moment of realization when the lightbulb finally came on. Even she could follow along with Koutarou’s plan.

“If we only need to do that, then I think we can manage. It still might be best to stop and take breaks now and again along the way, though.”

The amount of mana required to disguise the temperature of an object or person increased exponentially the closer the spell got to fully negating it. Thusly, shrinking a heat signature rather than negating it significantly reduced the amount of mana expended. And only halving one was something an elite archwizard like Yurika would easily be able to keep up for half a day at a time, even with multiple people.

“All, right, then it’s decided! We’ll move out at nightfall!”

“Yeah!”

“Okay!”

And so the three of them finally had their escape plan. While things looked grim and perilous now, they suddenly felt much closer to seeing their friends

again. It put a bright smile on each of their faces.

Meanwhile, Elsewhere

Saturday, November 20th

For everyone else still aboard Ohime, the plan was seriously jeopardized when the Imperial Army detected them as they began their descent to Alaia. Thanks to that, their stealthy reentry was rushed and they were attacked by imperial forces as soon as they reached the other side of Alaia's atmosphere and slowed down.

"Emergency alert, ho! We've detected four fighters approaching, ho!"

"They're fighters that scrambled from a nearby base, ho! The other nearby bases have probably launched fighters as well, so there will be more of them soon, ho!"

"Everyone, grab on to something! Things are going to get a little rough!"

No sooner than she said those words, Kiriha set the engines to maximum thrust and twisted the control stick to the side. They'd be easy pickings for the fighters if they flew in a straight path. In order to avoid that, they'd need to take evasive maneuvers.

"Changing the spiritual energy field to combat mode, ho! Deploying the active distortion field, ho! Engaging the interception system and commencing jamming, ho! Help us out, Maki-chan, ho!"

"Right! Greater Mirage!"

While Kiriha was trying to fly the ship out of harm's way, the haniwas activated its various defenses. Spiritual energy barriers and Forthorthian ones, jamming to get in the way of enemy guidance systems, and machine guns to shoot down any missiles that still managed to get close. Maki even cast a spell to create an illusory Ohime as a decoy. With everything she had in her court, Ohime wouldn't go down easily—not even against four fighters.

"Sanae, I'll leave the offense to you!"

“Roger that! Galaxy Sanae-chan Buster charged to 120 percent!”

“The name’s different from before, ho!”

“It’s the same thing to my soul, so watch out! Here we gooooo!”

As Sanae shouted out, four beams flew out from Ohime’s cannons. They were a mix of the energy from Ohime’s spiritual energy generator and Sanae’s own spiritual energy, which had a special benefit. Because they were partly Sanae’s energy, she could control them at will—a power she put to full use. The beams she fired cut a beautiful arc in the air, steering right for the enemy fighters.

“Wh-What?!”

“Impossible!”

The incredible sight took the fighter pilots by surprise. Beams reflecting off of something would be one thing, but seeing beams curve seemingly on their own midair was unbelievable. Completely caught off guard by it, the pilots followed their instincts and banked to the sides to avoid the beams.

“Don’t worry! I’m not going to hit you—yet!”

Sanae hummed gleefully to herself as she sent the beams chasing after the fighters. In her hands, the beams behaved more like missiles than beams, but they were immune to the standard defenses against physical projectiles. Growing irritated at being kept on the run, however, the pilots decided to take action.

“Kiriha, it looks they’re fed up! They’re going to start shooting!”

“Got it! Just keep it up!”

“Roger that!”

Each of the four fighters launched two missiles. But because they were fired under duress, three immediately flew astray. That left only five chasing after Ohime, and Kiriha was ready and waiting for them thanks to Sanae’s warning.

“Now then... I wonder what they’re using to track us.”

Kiriha swiftly ran one hand over an operations panel and fired off a few flares while reducing the output of the thrusters and turning the ship to the side.

“So it was optics after all.”

The missiles flew right past the flares and continued chasing after Ohime. That told Kiriha they were relying on visual data. The flares had been a test to see if they were thermal, and Kiriha knew they couldn't be radar-based with the active missile jamming up. Moreover, if they were targeting spiritual energy, they'd be chasing Sanae's beams rather than Ohime.

“Maki, can you make it look like the ship blew up?”

“Yes, I've done things like that before.”

“Then please give us a grand show.”

“Okay, leave it to me.”

“Clan-dono—”

“I'm already on it.”

“Heh, then I'm counting on you two.”

Ohime continued to flee the missiles for a time, but in the end was unable to shake them off. One struck a direct hit and exploded with a loud boom on impact. The rest followed suit, obliterating Ohime's frame and detonating its generator. The resultant explosion was so grand that it could easily be seen for kilometers.

“Sanae, how's it going over there?”

“Pretty good. Looks like they think they got us.”

“Good.”

Of course, the Ohime everyone saw blow up was Maki's decoy. When Clan activated her cloaking device to make the real Ohime invisible, Maki manipulated her illusion so that it would appear to explode.

“But we still need to get out of here post haste. They'll figure it out soon enough.”

Kiriha and the other girls couldn't afford to let their guard down just yet. Clan's cloaking device was meant for personal use and not large objects. Its effect wouldn't last long like this, and the instant it wore off, the ship would be

visible again. But even before then, the Imperial Army might realize they'd been duped if they went to investigate the wreckage of the ship and discovered there was none.

"Don't worry. Let's hide out there for a while."

Fortunately, Kiriha's plan had taken all this into consideration. She pointed at a large, nearby lake with a confident smile.

Strictly speaking, Ohime wasn't a spaceship so much as it was auxiliary gear for the haniwas. It was made to make use of the combat data they'd accumulated, and it was made to go anywhere the haniwas could. That meant that in addition to air and space, it could just as easily maneuver underground and underwater. Of course, that flexibility came at the cost of combat outfitting, meaning Ohime was considerably weaker than other crafts of comparable size—especially those specifically designed for combat. So knowing that they were up against four fighters with more on the way, Kiriha chose to escape rather than stand her ground.

"How is it looking?"

Elfaria, who had been in the residential quarter up until now, poked her head into the cockpit when Ohime finally came to a stop. As expected, she could barely sit still while Theia was missing.

"How are Yurika-chan and the others?"

Right by Elfaria's side was Nana, who was deeply concerned about Yurika, her pupil and friend.

"Well, we managed to shake our pursuers and are currently hiding out underwater. Sadly, however, we haven't heard anything from Theia-dono and the others yet."

The original plan was to lay low in the lake after descending to the surface disguised as a shard of ice. Even if the army arrived to investigate, they would never imagine that Ohime was hiding underwater. They would just wait quietly until the army left, and then proceed from there.

While they had been detected just before their descent, the enemy still didn't

know that Ohime had underwater capabilities. The quick-thinking Kiriha had simply adapted the plan, using Maki's illusion to throw off the enemy long enough to reach the water.

"I see... I just hope they're safe..."

The look on Elfaria's face was a mix of both relief and disappointment. The other girls knew exactly how she felt... They too were anxious about their missing friends.

"I just wish there was a way to confirm that the three of them are okay."

Nana looked up as she mumbled to herself. The ceiling of the ship was immediately overhead, but she was looking up past that... beyond the lake to somewhere far away.

"Sadly... if we use our comms now, the army will locate us immediately."

Contacting the missing trio wouldn't be that hard. They had a rough idea of where Koutarou and the others had landed, so they could just use a high-powered radio or gravitational waves if they wanted to. The problem was that, if they did, the army would know it. That meant that if they wanted to confirm the group's safety, they'd have to find a way to contact them that wasn't so readily detectable. While everyone was racking their brains to come up with a potential solution, the cockpit fell silent for a moment. That was when Harumi shyly raised her hand.

"Um, can I say something?"

When she did, all eyes in the room fell on her. Normally, that would be enough to overwhelm her a little, but this was an emergency. Bolstered by strong emotion, Harumi continued...

"I can sense Satomi-kun's presence through Signaltin, and I'm certain that he's safe."

She was constantly connected to Signaltin through a faint flow of mana. Thanks to that, she could magically tell the state of the sword without any special effort. And currently, Signaltin had used up a lot of mana during the reentry but was keeping up its usual defenses. That was proof Koutarou was alive and well.

“Are you sure, Harumi-san?!”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Satomi-kun is safe, so the other two should be as well.”

Since Signaltin hadn’t been used to cast any healing spells, Harumi was quite sure that Theia and Yurika were safe as well. As long as they weren’t killed instantly on impact, that is.

“I see... Then we can rest easy for now.”

After hearing Harumi’s report, Elfaria seemed to relax a little. The atmosphere in the cockpit quickly followed suit. Knowing their loved ones were safe went a long way to lightening everyone’s mood.

“If that’s the case, Sakuraba-senpai, can’t you use Satomi-kun’s sword to talk to him?”

And with the tension easing up, it became easier to think clearly. Connecting a few dots, Shizuka realized that Harumi should be able to use her connection with Signaltin to contact Koutarou.

“It is possible... but I feel like I shouldn’t.”

Harumi, however, shook her head impatiently in response to the idea. If she could, she’d love nothing more than to speak with Koutarou herself. But there was something holding her back.

“Why is that?”

“Shizuka, if the mana flowing between Signaltin and here gets stronger, it will reveal our positions to Darkness Rainbow. With that man involved, we need to consider the possibility they’re here.”



When Kiriha said “that man,” she meant Elexis. Since the fighters they’d encountered before reentry had been equipped with spiritual energy radars, she was sure he was involved somehow. That meant chances were high that Darkness Rainbow—who had escaped Folsaria with him—was lurking somewhere in the shadows too.

“Aika-san, do you think Darkness Rainbow will show up?”

“Maybe not the leaders, but certainly someone or something that can detect mana.”

Just the latent mana flowing between Harumi and Signaltin wasn’t enough to trigger any alarms. But if that mana increased to the point it was obvious magic was actively being used, someone would inevitably come looking. The same went for radio and gravitational waves.

“Should I go?”

With radio, gravitational waves, and magic all shelved, their only remaining option was spiritual energy. Sanae figured that using astral projection would be the fastest way to find Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika.

“No, let’s save that for our last resort. Your spiritual energy is too powerful.”

However, Kiriha shook her head at Sanae’s suggestion. Since the enemy had gotten their hands on spiritual energy sensors, there was a chance they could detect Sanae if she went flying around in her astral form.

“Then what do we do, Kiriha?! We can’t do anything like this!”

“We’ll start by getting a move on. We won’t be able to do anything with the army so close.”

Kiriha had chosen this lake in particular because of its size. It was large enough that they could move a considerable distance underwater, and hopefully emerge far enough away to fly under the enemy’s radar. While she too was worried about Koutarou and the others, she knew the first thing they needed to do was escape immediate danger.

Back in the vicinity of Earth, the Imperial Army of Forthorthe had lost to

Empress Elfaria and her supporters. But Elfaria's victory wasn't won with superior equipment or firepower—it was won with clever strategy.

Vandarion's goal in dispatching soldiers to Earth wasn't just to capture Elfaria. He was hoping she would fight back, killing Forthorthian soldiers in the process. He could then use that as ammunition to damage her image and reduce her support. But things hadn't gone Vandarion's way; in the end, there hadn't been a single casualty on either side. Elfaria had fought nobly by choosing to not fight at all, which only made her look better in the public eye.

Of course, Vandarion tried to keep a tight reign on the story of what had happened, but it was too monumental to keep under wraps. People were talking, and information spread via word of mouth like a wildfire too fast to put out. Moreover, the nation of Forthorthe celebrated free speech, so there was little Vandarion could do to inhibit the way information spread on an individual level.

As a result, the public soon knew that Elfaria had been absolutely victorious and that Vandarion had been made an absolute fool of. That was the final straw in convincing the prideful Vandarion to reconsider an alliance. That alone was bad enough as it was, but having to pay his respects to a young upstart like Elexis was downright infuriating.

Vandarion's anger was something Elexis had anticipated when he leaked strategic information—in fact, he'd counted on it—but it left him a little uncertain as to how Vandarion would respond to meeting him in person. That was the big question for Elexis when Vandarion summoned him for a conference, and the potential answers made him somewhat nervous.

“Thank you for coming, Elexis-kun.”

In stark contrast to Elexis's fears, however, Vandarion welcomed him into a lavish salon with a smile. Standing beside him was his aide, Granado, who also welcomed Elexis with a calm smile. It seemed they were the only two men in the salon waiting to receive him, which Elexis took as a sign of trust. Perhaps they'd really get somewhere with this conference after all.

“It's an honor to have you welcome me personally, Lord Vandarion.”

Elexis bowed from the doorway. Though he kept a smile on his face, he was

still rather nervous. This conference with Vandarion would affect his future for better or worse, so he'd have to stay on his toes the entire time.

"I wanted to personally thank you for the favor you did us in informing us of the true capabilities of Elfaria's faction."

"Your thanks is reward enough for me."

Elexis laughed like a young hotshot of a businessman, all the while carefully observing Vandarion.

This man's even scarier than I imagined...

Before their meeting today, Elexis held Vandarion in rather high regard. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he feared him. And if Vandarion wasn't stupid, he'd likely seen right through Elexis's leak. He probably knew good and well that he'd more or less been strong-armed into an alliance with Elexis, but he was doing an extraordinary job of keeping his cool. That told Elexis he had a strong handle on his emotions and was capable of tabulating losses and gains in a near cold-hearted fashion.

While things are going smoothly so far, I can't count on it staying that way... There's no telling what'll happen if I let my guard down.

Elexis was interested in an alliance with Vandarion to further his own goals. But after actually meeting Vandarion in person, he began to realize he might be the one getting used in this alliance if he didn't play his cards right. With that thought in the back of his mind, Elexis steeled himself and put on his best poker face.

"Come and have a seat, Elexis-kun. If you stand all the way over there, we won't be able to talk properly. Granado's even gone out of his way to prepare tea for us."

"Certainly... If you insist."

Acquiescing, Elexis walked toward the seat Vandarion indicated. His feet sunk into the plush carpet with every step, but the lavishness of the salon was the last thing on Elexis's mind right now.

This is where the real game begins...

Vandarion and Granado acting so friendly was purely superficial. In truth, Elexis didn't even see it as pleasantries. He was keenly aware that he was basically walking into the open jaws of a wild beast primed and ready to kill. He'd have to tread lightly and be ready for anything from here on out.

While Elexis and Vandarion were in the midst of their negotiations, subordinates from both sides were having a logistics meeting. It was understood that no matter who "won" or "lost" in the negotiations going on between Elexis and Vandarion, they would be walking away from their conference today with some kind of an agreement for an alliance. In preparation for that, their subordinates were establishing contact networks, lines of communications, emergency protocols, and so forth.

But mixed in with the DKI employees on Elexis's side were the girls of Darkness Rainbow, who were seeing to a special mission of their own. With magic on their side, they had a special advantage when it came to espionage. They could change their appearances on a whim and easily infiltrate places that would be inaccessible to anyone else. Between that and being able to remote eavesdrop, hypnotize people, and even directly read minds, they were easily able to shut down the information gathering operation Vandarion's men were trying to run behind the scenes while simultaneously gathering information themselves.

"So, how were Vandarion and Granado?"

Maya, who had been leading Darkness Rainbow on their counterintelligence and reconnaissance mission, welcomed Elexis when he returned from his meeting. Though she'd just been on an operation that would have cost her her life if she'd been caught, you'd never know it based on the smile on her face. She looked like she'd just come back from a girls' night out.

"Terrifying, honestly. If I'd shown even the slightest weakness, I'm sure they would've eaten me right up."

"They must really be something to make you say that."

Elexis, on the other hand, looked exhausted. The moment he saw Maya's smiling face, the exhaustion and tension he'd been burying rose to the surface.

He'd only been talking with Vandarion and Granado, but he felt like he'd been running the gauntlet. But now that he was alone with Maya in the waiting room that had been assigned to him, he felt like he could finally take a breath.

"I managed to strike a deal for mutual cooperation, but... I get chills imagining if all of you hadn't been here. I really am a lucky man."

Elexis and Vandarion's talk had ended on a peaceful note. They agreed to work together on friendly terms as equal allies—as partners. This would undoubtedly boost his reputation as a shrewd businessman, but Elexis was actually quite wary of what working with Vandarion would really mean. The peaceful conference and mutually beneficial terms of their agreement were still just pleasantries. If Elexis didn't keep his wits about him, he knew he would end up being taken advantage of. That paranoia made it especially reassuring to have Darkness Rainbow on his side. Thanks to their magic, for example, even right here in the middle of one of Vandarion's bases, he had no reason to worry about being eavesdropped on.

"You're really talking them up here, El."

"That's just my honest impression. When you meet them, I'm sure you'll understand."

"Where'd your backbone go? You were prepared to deal with them on your own before you met me, weren't you?"

"Right now, I'm thanking the stars that never had to happen."

Elexis hadn't said anything to flatter or be polite; he was quite serious. He genuinely needed Maya and Darkness Rainbow in order to play on the same field with Vandarion. So though Maya hadn't met Vandarion herself, she started to pick up on just how terrifying of a man he must really be based on Elexis's reaction to him.

"I wasn't quite sure before hearing you say all that, but now I don't think there's any doubt... So let me tell you something, El."

"What's up?"

Seeing the smile disappear from Maya's face, Elexis raised an eyebrow and refocused his attention. If she was getting serious, he knew he needed to be

too. Satisfied that he'd picked up on that, Maya continued.

"Vandarion's planning on taking out Elfaria and her faction by wiping out the entire planet of Alaia."

"What?!"

Elexis was absolutely taken aback. He knew that Vandarion and Granado were to be feared, but he didn't think they'd go that far.

"We found plans for it on their computers and some of their subordinates were thinking about it. I thought it was only a possibility at first, but after hearing what you said about those men, I think it's more likely a reality."

Maya's expression was stern. She hadn't expected them to go that far either. But after hearing Elexis's firsthand account of what they were like, Maya realized they wouldn't hesitate to go through with it.

"What a stupid thing to do..."

"There's no beauty to their methods. They're inconsistent and off kilter."

Elexis and Maya didn't hesitate to use twisted means to further their own goals either, but there were lines even they didn't cross. Elexis was trying to create a better society, so he believed in keeping civilian casualties to a minimum. Maya wanted the people of Folsaria to return to Forthorthe with dignity, so she had no interest in turning the empire into a barren wasteland.

"So in the end, they're no different than Tayuma..."

"They're a little different, I'd say. They're beholden to no moral code, and that makes them all the more dangerous."

Elexis and Maya were both interested in a home. They wanted to fix the nation, to build it up. Destroying it was out of the question. They simply couldn't accept Vandarion's way of thinking. But the seeds of evil are tenacious when they take root...

Father and Daughter

Saturday, November 20th

Fighters from nearby bases had scrambled and rendezvoused in the area where Ohime went down. Fortunately, Maki's illusory explosion had made for the perfect cover, allowing the real Ohime to escape and hide underwater in a nearby lake—something the Imperial Army would never suspect. They thought the ship had gone down in flames, and by the time they realized the explosion was some kind of trick, Ohime would be long gone.

"So, Kiriha, what do we do now?"

Sanae had been scanning the area for auras like a radar for some time now, but now she stretched and leaned back in her seat as she lazily turned to Kiriha. She could no longer sense any nearby presences, meaning Ohime had safely escaped from any pursuers and she could finally relax a little.

"I'd like to go look for Koutarou and the others, but the circumstances won't allow it. We'll head to the Elfaria faction base as planned."

Kiriha seemed to feel a little relieved as well, seeing how her expression eased up ever so slightly. That was the first time she experienced a re-entry so it was only obvious she'd feel a little anxious.

"Is that really okay?"

"Yeah. Koutarou and the others won't be able to find us either, so they're probably headed for the base as well."

"And we'll meet up there?"

"That's right."

In Kiriha's mind, the fastest way to find Koutarou and the others was to proceed as planned. There was no telling where they'd ended up, and going to search for them or trying to make contact would be dangerous. With the army on high alert, they could expect an immediate response and find themselves

surrounded the moment they tried. And since neither side could contact the other, the safest thing to do was stick to the plan they'd agreed upon beforehand. The bases and safehouses Elfaria's faction used were all part of the same network, so as long as both parties made it to one, they could connect with each other that way.

"In that case, I shall take things from here."

That was where Ruth, who was sitting in the operator's seat, joined the discussion. She was the most knowledgeable when it came to Elfaria's faction. In fact, you could say she had an inside man...

"So we're finally going to meet Ruthpapa?"

"Indeed. I certainly hope he's doing well."

Kiriha and the other girls were currently headed for the largest base on Alaia, which lay in Pardomshiha family lands. When Forthorthe entered the space age, the Mastir family granted territory on Alaia to the Pardomshiha family in addition to the land they already held on Planet Forthorthe. And because the Pardomshiha family personally oversaw their own territory on Alaia, they'd been able to secretly construct a pro-Elfaria base without any of Elfaria's enemies finding out. The commander of said base was none other than Lord Pardomshiha himself. In other words, heading to the base meant Ruth would be reunited with her father.

"Say, what kind of person is Ruthpapa?"

"Well... I think he's serious, just like me."

"Guess it runs in the family, huh?"

"Yes. And perhaps because of his age, he's rather cagey. Not even the empress can coax him into doing anything these days."

Lord Pardomshiha proudly carried on the two thousand year lineage of the Pardomshiha family. He was loyal to the royal families, the strong and silent type, and well versed in both literary and military arts. Second only to the Blue Knight, Lord Pardomshiha was the perfect knight. He set an excellent example for all the other knights of Forthorthe to follow.

“...I hate him.”

Elfaria, who had been listening on the discussion, abruptly began pouting. She folded her arms in such a childish fashion that it made everyone around her skeptical that she was old or mature enough to really have a child of her own.

The reason for her micro-tantrum, however, was precisely because of Lord Pardomshiha and his steadfastness as a model knight. He was just wise and keen enough that not even Elfaria—who was known in the castle for her foxy ways—could pull one over on him. He was the only one who could stand up to her wiles while simultaneously finding a way to put her in her place. There was a reason people always said, “When in trouble, turn to Pardomshiha.”

“In short, the empress trusts him so much that she has no problem openly declaring that she hates him.”

“I can see that.”

Kiriha couldn't help giggling, and neither could Clan sitting next to her.

“This is no laughing matter, you two! Goodness...”

It was true. Elfaria was only so open about her ostensible hatred for Lord Pardomshiha because she explicitly trusted him. He was almost like family to her, like a close uncle. Their catty relationship was a well-known media sensation throughout the kingdom, and was in part the reason they were both so beloved by the citizenry.

After travelling several dozen kilometers away underwater, Ohime stealthily emerged from the lake and continued on her way. While keeping an eye out for the Imperial Army, Elfaria and the girls cautiously proceeded to the base in Pardomshiha territory. The base itself was built underground in an expansive area of high mountains and deep valleys. The geography naturally helped to conceal the base, so finding it without knowing precisely what to look for would be most difficult.

The inside of the base was aesthetically similar to Blue Knight and employed a unique design based around smooth curves, but there were sections where raw steel was exposed. That was because the base had been built in a hurry, and

anywhere that didn't need to be polished up for safety reasons was simply left as it was. Overall, it gave the base a very different atmosphere from the facilities the Imperial Army used.

"Your Majesty! I am so very glad you are safe!"

Upon seeing Elfaria disembark from Ohime, Lord Pardomshiha ran up to her at full speed. He looked like a child running to greet his lost mother, or perhaps more aptly, a father running to embrace his runaway daughter.

"I've certainly caused you a good bit of trouble, Pardomshiha. Did you get any more gray hairs?"

"Hahaha, a lot has been happening here as well, Your Majesty. I'm glad to see you haven't changed. Actually, if I'm not mistaken, you seem even more energetic than before."

"A lot has happened with us as well. I'll fill you in on the details later."

Lord Pardomshiha was right. There was a certain sparkle in Elfaria's eye now. She was excited because she'd brought the Blue Knight back to Forthorthe, because life on Earth had been far more fun than she'd ever imagined, and much, much more. However, she couldn't reveal any of that in public right now. Moreover, there were more serious issues at hand.

"Very well. Now, from what I hear, Princess Theiamillis is missing?"

"Let's start from there. Oh, actually, before that..."

Elfaria suddenly grabbed the hand of the girl standing next to her and forcibly pulled her in front of Lord Pardomshiha.

"Kyaaah! Y-Your Majesty?!"

It was Ruth. And it was thanks to Elfaria that she and Lord Pardomshiha—her father—were now finally standing face to face after being separated for so long.

"Let's get the important stuff out of the way first. Both of you are too distracted right now to do anything else, no?"

Elfaria wanted the newly-reunited father and daughter to have a chance to talk before getting started with the more complicated discussions. She'd picked up on the fact that Ruth wanted to speak with her father, but found herself

unable to do so. She also knew that, due to his position, Lord Pardomshiha would never stall business for personal matters.

“Your methods are as heavy-handed as ever... but I am grateful for them this time.”

Both Lord Pardomshiha and Ruth bowed to Elfaria before turning to face each other once again.

“I’ve returned, Father.”

“Long time no see, Ruth. Is it just me, or have you gotten taller?”

“Just a little bit.”

Ruth and her father were actually quite close, and being separated all this time had done nothing to change that. In spite of how long it had been since they last saw each other, they smiled at each other like they’d never been apart. If anything, it seemed the distance had even helped to bring them closer.

“Perhaps that’s it, but you seem much more mature. I supposed you’re slowly becoming a grown woman... As your father, I don’t know whether that should make me happy or sad.”

Lord Pardomshiha looked over his daughter with proud eyes. She did indeed seem to be different from when he last saw her months ago; Ruth really was maturing into a splendid woman by the day. It was almost painful to see. Though Lord Pardomshiha was happy to see her growing, part of him wanted her to remain as his sweet young daughter forever.

Though she knew it was at least partially because he was such a doting parent, Ruth was happy to hear her father praise her. It was a bit embarrassing, but she was still at an age where she looked up to and relied on him.

“I’m hardly a grown woman yet,” she said, blushing and shaking her head.

“My, my. Girls really do change when they fall in love,” her father responded, folding his arms and nodding.

He seemed as though he’d come to some profound realization, but seeing him like that sent Ruth into a fluster.

“F-Father?!”

She couldn't help her sudden, red-faced outburst, which in turn made her immediately worry about the looks she was getting.

"Based on that reaction, you must really be in love after all."

Seeing how Ruth reacted to what he said, Lord Pardomshiha grinned. He'd suspected that she might have someone special ever since the whole engagement incident.

"O-Oh no!"

"I see, I see... Even a serious girl like you..."

Though Ruth was still young, she'd already matured into a splendid heir for the Pardomshiha family. She was fiercely loyal to the royal families and a model knight that had sworn to always abide justice. As a young woman, however, that was perhaps something of a personal setback. As serious and devoted as she was, Ruth never chased after her own happiness. She focused all of her time and energy into serving the royal families and upholding the honor of the Pardomshihans. Lord Pardomshiha was proud of her, certainly, but he was also concerned for her. That was why he'd helped arrange the engagement between Ruth and Elexis, even if it ended in disaster.

But now it seemed he hadn't any reason to worry—Ruth had already fallen in love with someone. And Lord Pardomshiha was elated at the prospect. Normally he was the very image of manliness and unyielding steadfastness, but right now he was nothing more than a doting father.

"So, what's he like? Don't get me wrong; if he was enough to win your heart, he has my wholehearted approval! I'm simply curious. So tell me—what kind of man is he? Is he as strong as I am?!"

"U-Um, th-that's not... I mean, you see... R-Right! Please don't bring up something like that in a place like this!"

Ruth, meanwhile, was completely thrown off her groove. She was earnest and upfront about most anything, but her sense of propriety was second to none. Talking about the man she loved in a crowded base was simply out of the question.

"I see... So you're not denying it?"

“Please take this more seriously!”

“Ah, I’m sorry. You’re right. Princess Theiamillis is still missing...”

His daughter’s rebuke cooled his head a little, and Lord Pardomshiha quickly got a hold of himself. He too was quite concerned about the missing princess. Seeing her father like that, Ruth was also able to return to normal.

“She may be missing, but we at least know that she’s safe. She has a knight with her to protect her.”

“Is that for certain?”

“Yes. You can have absolute faith in this knight.”

Ruth vouched for him with unshaken confidence. While she didn’t know what kind of situation they may have found themselves in, Ruth was sure that Koutarou would keep Theia safe.

“I see... A guardian knight, huh?”

There, Lord Pardomshiha began stroking his beard and nodding like he’d come to some sort of understanding.

“F-Father?”

“It must be the man you fell in love with. It hit me just now when you praised him so.”

Lord Pardomshiha sensed that Ruth completely trusted the knight in question. And it was rather unlike her to fully entrust Theia to someone else, let alone feel good about it.

“Objectively speaking, you’ve accepted this man. You would never entrust the princess to him unless you believed him to be fully trustworthy and at least as capable as you are. Indeed, your feelings for him must be very special... I see, I see. So that’s what it was...”

“J-Just stop it already!”

“I’m glad you found a good man, Ruth. Yes, yes indeed... I’m very happy for you.”

“I really will get angry, Father!”

Ever since being reunited with her father, Ruth had been in a constant fluster. The earnest, heat-of-the-moment nature of their reunion helped bring them even closer, but Ruth was in too much of a tizzy to realize it. She'd spend some time yet red-faced and embarrassed over the whole encounter.

While most of the other girls were fondly watching Ruth in the hot seat, one of them was looking elsewhere. It was the former dark magical girl of the group, Maki.

"So this is Forthorthe... our true home..."

The moment Maki's feet touched the ground upon disembarking Ohime, she felt something different from the other girls. The people of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria, where Maki was born, dreamed of one day returning to their true home of Forthorthe. That dream had waned over the years with each passing generation, but it still lingered in the heart of every Folsarian. And here Maki was, finally setting foot upon the soil of her true home. While she was still far away from the planet of Forthorthe, Alaia was still part of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire.

"We finally made it here. And alive at that, Nav—I'm sorry—Maki-san."

"Nana-san..."

If there was anyone who understood how Maki felt, it was Nana, a fellow Folsarian.

"It feels kind of strange."

"Heh, I know what you mean."

In the heat of battle, the people of the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria sometimes used a special death threat: "Return to your true home." Maki had even once said it to Koutarou. It conveyed the clear intent to kill someone and send them home—in death rather than life. The Folsarians believed that, at the very least, even if they were never physically able to return home, their spirits would find their way there in the afterlife.

It was a dark, deeply emotional sentiment. But here Maki and Nana were; they'd made it to Folsaria alive. They were truly standing where they'd only

ever dreamed of making it. It was indeed a strange feeling.

“I wonder if Maya and the others felt this way too.”

Nana took a few steps out onto the dock where Ohime had landed and looked up through the window. High in the sky overhead, she could see Planet Forthorthe backlit by the sun.

“I think so. I’m sure they’ve already made it to Forthorthe proper.”

Maki stepped forward next to Nana and looked up at Forthorthe alongside her. Her thoughts turned to Maya, who was most likely already there. Since Maki had been Maya’s apprentice for so long, she had a good handle on the way she thought and operated.

“And they’ll be even more motivated than before, I imagine.”

“I’m sure. They’ll build a base and grow stronger here before taking action against Folsaria and having their real homecoming. There’s no doubt in my mind about that.”

Maya was a proud woman. She ultimately wouldn’t accept this as her “real” return to Forthorthe as long as she was under Elexis’s protection. Right now, she was just here to help him out as part of her preparations for a grand return. And now that she’d set foot on Forthorthian soil, her desire for said grand return was likely stronger than ever.

“We can’t underestimate them.”

“I agree. I think Maya-sama and the others will be an altogether different enemy now that they have a clearly defined goal.”

Up until now, Nana had specifically tried to avoid calling Darkness Rainbow their enemy. But the word slipped Maki’s lips easily. Since that was no small deal to Nana, she turned to Maki to confirm her choice of words.

“So they’re really our enemies now, are they...?”

Maki gave a decisive nod in response. She’d steeled her resolve a long time ago.

“Yes. I’m sure if we make the effort, we can come to an understanding with Maya-sama and the others. We might even be able to work together and walk

side by side for a time. But...”

“In the end, we’ll choose different paths?”

“That’s right. What we value and what they value is just too different. That will be the driving factor in the decisions we make, and ultimately what leads us down different paths.”

Maki wanted connections with people. Darkness Rainbow on the other hand fundamentally wanted freedom. At the end of the day, they were opposite wishes. Maki wanted to be bound to something and Darkness Rainbow wanted to be bound by nothing. They’d never truly see eye to eye because of that. It was no different from how Maki hadn’t truly been able to hold Crimson back, even as a friend.

“This is going to be a difficult fight.”

“I’m prepared for it. Besides... I’m not alone anymore. I have Yurika and everyone else with me.”

“Ah, so that’s it...”

Seemingly satisfied with something, Nana grinned.

“What is?”

“When I was watching you fighting back then, I could tell how much stronger you’d become since you and I last fought. I was wondering what the difference was, but now I get it.”

In the past, Maki had always carried something like resignation with her like a dark cloud. But she was different now. She’d taken that hopelessness and reforged it into an iron will that bolstered her. And since magic increased in power proportionate to its caster’s will, Maki was now far stronger than ever before. Nana finally understood why.

“It seems you’ve found something worth protecting.”

“I have. And I’ll keep it safe at all costs.”

Maki firmly nodded. She knew exactly what she wanted to protect and exactly what she’d have to do to keep it safe. She was ready to fight, even if that meant going up against Maya or Crimson. Nana sensed Maki’s resolve and smiled

bitterly in her mind when she realized that there was no reason to worry.

“By the way, Maki-san...”

“Yes?”

“When this is all over, do you have any intentions of becoming a Rainbow?”

“Me?!”

“Yes.”

In the past, Maki had been solely Dark Navy. But now that she’d matured—both as a girl and as a magical girl—she had more color to her. Nana fully believed that at this rate, she could blossom into a full-on rainbow.

“You must be joking.”

“Hardly. You could definitely become one the way you are now. I’m sure you could become a Rainbow to rival even Yurika-chan.”

“I... I can only hope...”

High in the sky overhead hung the planet of Forthorthe. In that moment, the sun struck it in such a way that it appeared to be wreathed in an aura that shone like a rainbow.



Checkpoint

Sunday, November 21st

While Ohime had safely reached the main base of Elfaria's faction, Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika were still deep in the woods of Alaia. Being forced to travel stealthily by foot slowed them down significantly.

"Um, Satomi-san..."

"What?"

"Did something just move over there?"

"Seriously? You're starting with that again?"

"But...!"

They could only move under cover of darkness, and Yurika was particularly bad at dealing with the forest at night. She was always scared that something was right about to jump out from the bushes and eat her up.

"You really do become useless once you lose motivation."

"I-I don't care what you say! I can't help it! It's scary out here!"

"Boo!"

Right on cue, Theia snuck up behind Yurika and startled her.

"Kyaaa— Mmmph!"

Yurika let out a wail in response, and Koutarou quickly covered her mouth.

"Theia, think about the situation we're in! What would you have done if there were enemies nearby?!"

"I know, I know. Don't worry. I did a scan beforehand. We're in the clear."

"Mmmmmmmph! Mmmph! Mmmmmmmmmph!"

"But why would you do that now of all times?!"

“I figured a little scare might help her calm down.”

“It did the exact opposite!”

“Mmmmmph... Mm...”

“Nuh-uh. See? She’s getting quiet.”

“What? Hey, Yurika! Breathe!”

While it was taxing on poor Yurika, the truth was that her constant fright was useful for Koutarou and Theia. In such a desperate situation isolated from the rest of their allies, things were starting to get a bit gloomy. Yurika’s over-the-top ridiculousness, however, helped lighten things up for her travelling companions. Really, she was the one keeping things together. But sadly for her, no one appreciated that right now.

“Y-You two aren’t being very nice! I’m really scared here!”

Even after the initial commotion died down, Yurika was still angry. But at least she was walking like normal now. The anger seemed to supplant her out-of-control fear. So in the end, Theia’s plan had worked perfectly.

“I said I was sorry. It wasn’t on purpose.”

“If you’re really sorry, hold my hand tighter.”

“Okay, okay, jeez... You really are a mess sometimes.”

That said, Yurika’s temper was quickly cooling. That was thanks to Koutarou, who was leading her by the hand as an apology. And that was all Yurika was focusing on right now.

“...Eeheehee...”

Holding Koutarou’s hand, she was reminded of the time she gave him a kiss on the cheek. It overwhelmed her with a nostalgic sort of giddiness, which readily supplanted all the anger she was still harboring.

“You little...”

Whap!

“What now?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Then why did you kick me?”

“I said it was nothing!”

Whap, whap!

That anger, however, seemed to transfer over to Theia. And Koutarou would take quite a few more swift kicks before he realized it.

Koutarou’s armor and Theia’s Combat Dress had used up most of their energy and all of their emergency propellant during reentry, but were otherwise operational despite some minor damage. That meant they wouldn’t be able to fly or put up barriers, but their other functions were still intact. Thanks to that, both Koutarou and Theia were warned of the incoming threat with plenty of time to spare.

“Alert. Detecting an approaching heat source. Distance: 200 meters. Based on heat signature, there is a 70 percent chance it is a pack of wild wolves.”

While Alaia’s ecosystem was artificial, it still contained a slew of dangerous wildlife. Without anything to keep the herbivore population in check, they would eventually come to destroy all the flora that had been carefully planted. To prevent that, Forthorthe had carefully constructed a food chain to keep everything balanced naturally. And its apex predators—the top of the food chain—were Forthorthian wolves. They were smart enough to avoid humans, which reduced the number of incidents where the two species crossed paths. But that was only when they stayed in their respective territories—and right now, Koutarou and the others were *definitely* in wolf country.

“S-See?! There really was something!”

“Stop clinging to me. I can’t move.”

“I’m scared too, Koutarou!”

“Theia, why are you joining in?!”

“Just joking around.”

“Joking around doesn’t work on wolves!”

“I know, I know.”

“You get off too, Yurika.”

“...Okay.”

Koutarou and the girls panicked a little when they were first notified of the wolves' presence, but they'd been through enough at this point that they quickly got a hold of themselves and began formulating a strategy.

“We're the ones intruding on their territory here... I wonder if there's a way to avoid a fight.”

Koutarou could feel the hostility of the approaching wolves thanks to the psychic powers Sanae had given him. They were angry at the humans intruding on their territory. Koutarou and the others had just happened to pass by the area, and they didn't know the rules of nature, so they had ended up intruding. If possible, they wanted to avoid a fight.

“What can we do to make them forgive us?” Yurika asked as she squinted at the darkness.

They were far enough away that she couldn't see them, but Yurika was sure the wolves were baring their fangs at her right now. It was scary.

“We should hurry up and get out of here.”

“But if we flee too quickly, they'll think we're weak and attack.”

“Really? What makes you say that?”

“That's what I would do if I were a wolf.”

“Well, then I guess there's no doubting it.”

“...If there's something you want to say, why don't you just say it already?”

“Oh, I wouldn't dare.”

“Then how about we run away slowly?”

“That would normally be the thing to do, although there are exceptions.”

“Like what?”

“Like if the wolves are starving.”

“Eeeeeek!”

Koutarou and the girls slowly changed course to try and avoid a confrontation. But the wolves followed right after them, stalking them rather than closing the distance. It didn't seem like they were going to attack, but they showed no signs of giving up their pursuit either.

“Basically, we're just sizing each other up right now.”

“Can't we just hide and wait for them to go away?”

“I'd love to do that... but they are beasts with excellent senses.”

“How about it, Yurika?”

In this situation, Yurika's magic was the most reliable thing they had. If they used artillery or other weapons, it would draw too much attention.

“I could get them to go away, sure, but it would take a lot of mana to do it.”

“Which would be like sending a signal flare to Darkness Rainbow, huh?”

“What should we do now...?”

They wanted nothing more than to escape the wolves pursuing them. They could easily use magic to get rid of them, but then they'd have Darkness Rainbow on their tail instead. It was quite the conundrum.

“Awooooo!”

Suddenly, the wolves in the darkness began making a fuss. There was howling and growling like they'd started a fight.

“What happened?!”

At first, Koutarou thought the wolves were attacking, which was only natural given the circumstances. However, the snarling commotion wasn't getting any closer. The wolves were keeping their distance. Just as Koutarou began wondering why, his armor's AI gave him the answer.

“Alert. Enemy craft approaching. There is a 95 percent chance it is a small reconnaissance drone.”

The wolves had apparently shifted their focus when a strange machine approached in the air. Unlike Koutarou and the girls, it was directly approaching

the wolves. That made it an immediate threat, which took priority over the seemingly nonaggressive humans who were fleeing.

“I see. So that’s why the wolves—”

“Koutarou, Yurika! We’re hiding right now!”

“Got it!”

“O-Okay!”

The three of them dove under a fallen tree. Not a few seconds later, the reconnaissance drone—which looked quite similar to the ones Ruth used—appeared through the woods. It flew a couple of meters in the air, shining a light on the ground below as it slowly approached the fallen tree where Koutarou and the girls were hiding. But right behind it was the snarling pack of wolves, plain as day when the searchlight shone their way.

“Did they figure out we were using magic to move around?” Yurika whispered uneasily as she watched the searchlight sway.

Knowing misfortune was never far, her first thought was that they’d already been found out.

“If that were the case, they’d come straight for us. This is either just a coincidence or they came to investigate the wolves, maybe.”

Theia’s battle-hardened intuition told her they hadn’t done anything wrong—not even Yurika. If they’d been discovered already, the drone wouldn’t bother searching the area. Seemingly, however, it had gone for the wolves first. Theia was sure that meant one of two things.

The first possibility was simply that the reconnaissance drone was on patrol, and that it just so happened to encounter the pack of wolves. Determining them to be a non-threat, it then came this way to investigate other heat sources in the area.

The second possibility was that it had deliberately come to this area to investigate the wolf pack. Wolves were the apex predators of Alaia’s forests, yet this pack was cautiously following three small animals—which were really Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia with their heat signatures magically reduced.

Chances were that someone thought it was strange and had sent the drone to check it out.

“So they don’t really know what’s going on?”

“I don’t think so, no. And I don’t think there’s any way they know we’re using magic.”

The surveillance drone had either ended up here by pure chance, or it had come to check out the wolves. Either way, it wasn’t in the area because it had any idea that Koutarou and the girls were here. Even in the worst case scenario, it was only investigating the possibility.

“Then let’s just keep hiding here.”

“I have to say, Yurika... I agree with you for once.”

“Pipe down, you two. Play it cool.”

The three friends covered their mouths and held their breath as they watched the drone get closer. It certainly wasn’t slow, but each and every second that passed by was tense agony. The few minutes it took for the drone to actually reach the fallen tree felt like an eternity. Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia had never felt time move so slowly before.

But at last, at the end of that dreadful eternity, the drone was right overhead. It was close enough that they could hear the mechanical whirring of its inner workings. They could even reach their hands out and grab it if they stood up. And that only made it more terrifying. Theia and Yurika each silently took one of Koutarou’s hands. They both hoped they’d be able to fool the drone’s sensors, but nothing was certain. The only thing they knew for sure was what would happen if the Imperial Army discovered them now—just the thought of which made them nervous. In order to ease the anxiety they could do nothing about, they needed each other. That would have been true even if Koutarou weren’t there. But right now, he was. And battle had taught him both to be bold and to be there for his allies. Taking that to heart, he squeezed both Theia and Yurika’s hands back.

Was the operator cautious? Or had the programmer responsible for the AI just been that thorough? Whatever the reason, the reconnaissance drone

reached out under the fallen tree with a wiry arm in order to examine the small heat sources.

Not good!

The instant Koutarou realized the arm was reaching for them, sweat started dripping down from his forehead. Theia and Yurika instinctively squeezed his hands harder. If the arm had a camera or a different type of sensor on it, they were done for. Steeling himself for the worst, he began thinking of ways to protect Theia.

But then, all of a sudden...

“Squeeeeak!”

A small animal leaped out from under the fallen tree. It brushed the side of the mechanical arm and continued running past it. The drone turned and immediately gave chase to the escaping subject.

Now's our chance!

Not wasting the opportunity, Koutarou gripped the girls' hands and pulled them out from under the tree. While keeping an eye on the searchlight, he moved them to a different fallen tree in an area that had already been searched.

Fortunately, the drone didn't notice their movements. After confirming the identity of the small animal that had run off, the reconnaissance drone returned to the tree Koutarou and the girls had originally been hiding under. After examining it to its satisfaction, the drone then disappeared off into the trees. The wolves continued to chase after it, and their howling and snarling slowly moved off into the distance.

“Phew... They're finally gone...”

Koutarou was better at handling the active tension of battle than the static dread of hiding. Grateful it was over, he leaned over the fallen tree and heaved a relieved sigh.

“Yeah, jeez... We better be grateful for that little critter...”

“Waaah! That was scary!”

“I thought my heart was gonna stop.”

Yurika was primarily scared, but Theia felt the relief Koutarou did and heaved a heavy sigh of her own. The past few minutes had exhausted all three of them.

“Theia, we’ve still got some time before daybreak, but how about we call it a night here?”

“I agree. It’s best not to push our luck.”

“I finally get to rest a little...”

Their nerves were shot. They still had over an hour before first light, but nothing good would come of pressing onward under such conditions. Instead, they decided to conserve their energy and find a place to lie low for the day.

Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia finally slipped out the other side of the forest on the night of their fourth day on Alaia. In total, they’d traveled over a 100 kilometers over the course of just three and a half days. Considering the constant detours they’d had to take in order to avoid making contact with the enemy, they’d made impressive time.

Just outside of the forest was a small town, and just past that was the Pardomshiha territory. Once they reached Ruth’s family lands, things would be much easier for them. While the general population of Alaia was supportive of Elfaria, the citizens of Pardomshiha territory were deeply loyal to her. They all felt like they were members of the Pardomshiha family in spirit, including even the local members of the Imperial Army.

That said, Pardomshiha territory still felt like it was a long way away. It wouldn’t be easy to get through the border town. The soldiers who were stationed there were largely Vandarion’s flunkies, meaning Theia wouldn’t be able to pull any strings. Getting through this checkpoint would be their last hurdle to safety.

“Can’t we just take a detour around the town instead of going through it?”

“The town is situated within a valley, so if we want to go around, that will mean scaling the mountains... which have all been trapped in order to prevent wild animals from coming into town.”

“What, with shock traps or something?”

“It starts from there and gradually gets worse.”

The traps set in the mountains to keep the wildlife at bay were designed to be as humane as possible. They started with mild electric shocks and slowly upped the ante from there. It was an especially effective deterrent against animals, known for their keen sense of danger.

“Then why don’t we just fly over with magic?”

“Airborne infiltration is a standard magical tactic, so it’s likely one of the first things they set up defenses against.”

“I see... So we’re all thinking the same thing.”

Yurika’s experience told her that they were better off not trying to fly over the town. It was a common strategy, and she was sure that the Imperial Army would have countermeasures—doubly so if Elexis and Darkness Rainbow were helping them out. They might even have access to antiaircraft magic monitoring.

Moreover, since there were fewer people flying over the town than entering it on foot, they drew a certain amount of extra attention. If security was tight enough, the soldiers might even shoot down anyone who didn’t have permission.

“In that case, breaking through the front without using magic is more efficient against magic.”

Normally, magical stealth was a contest of the strength of one opponent’s stealth magic versus the strength of the other opponent’s detection magic. The stealthy opponent would need to conceal their appearance, any sound they were making, and any mana they were using magic to do so. All the detector had to do, however, was pick up on a single trace of their opponent and their cover would be blown. So, in effect, the best way to avoid magical detection was to not use any magic at all.

On the flip side, if they didn’t use any magic at all, they’d likely be discovered by mundane means while trying to enter the town. Theia was well known enough that the risk of someone recognizing her was especially high. A simple

disguise might do the trick, but they didn't have the tools for that with them. Deciding how to proceed would be a tough call.

"What if... What if we just go all out and use an ace-in-the-hole spell to get us through instantly?"

Detection magic needed to be kept up constantly, meaning that it required a magician to actively maintain it. Whenever they took a break or had to recast the spell, the detection would temporarily come down. Because of that, there would be very limited windows of opportunity where Yurika could cast a spell at full force without anyone noticing. While such a thing would have been impossible against Folsarian forces well-versed in the ways of magic, they were dealing with Forthorthian soldiers who only just barely understood it.

"So, Yurika... If you turned us into cats and dogs and erased all traces of your mana, how long could you keep that up?"

Koutarou had decided option C would be the best course of action: using a powerful spell in what would essentially be a detection blind spot. Because they had Theia in tow, trying to go through normal inspections to get through the town would just be too risky. And if they were to use magic, it would be easier to turn themselves into small animals than to try and disguise themselves. That way, they could simply bypass the soldiers and the checkpoint altogether. But since doing so would use more mana, there was still an inherent risk.

"Well, to fully transform three people and conceal all that mana... um... Ten minutes, maybe?"

Yurika added it up on her fingers and come to the conclusion that ten minutes would be about the best she could manage. Transforming a human into a completely different creature would require a high-level spell, and doing it three times while simultaneously concealing traces of the spell would dramatically increase the amount of mana it took. Even with Yurika's abilities, ten minutes would be her limit.

"And of those ten minutes, how long are you absolutely sure you can last?"

"I'm certain that I can last at least five minutes."

"Hang on. Wouldn't just using an illusion be better?"

Theia began to get nervous after hearing that they might only have five minutes. They had a good way left to go just to get to the town. Five minutes might not even be enough to reach it. Moreover, not knowing what kind of situation they'd end up in on the other side of the checkpoint was cause for concern. That's why Theia suggested an illusion spell. That would use less mana, meaning Yurika could keep it up longer and buy them more time to get to safety.

"If she uses an illusion spell, the observation devices at the gate could be a problem. I think a full-on transformation is the only way to fool them all."

"I-I think so too."

"Hmm, that *is* problematic..."

Illusions, however, had certain limitations. They were designed to fool humans by tricking the mind, which didn't work on machines. Yurika would need a different spell to deceive scales, x-rays, heat sensors, and any audio detection devices. And by the time she had all those bases covered, she'd be using as much mana as she would have with a transformation spell, if not more.

"Then how about we get close to the gate with an illusion before transforming?"

Unexpectedly, it was Yurika who came up with a clever solution to the problem at hand. Since she rarely showed such ingenuity under normal circumstances, Koutarou and Theia looked at each other stunned.

"You're awfully bright today, Yurika."

"But she's right... That would make sure we can take full advantage of our five minute transformation time."

All of the observational equipment at the checkpoint was short-range and focused in town. In other words, they could approach using a more haphazard method than they'd need to actually get through.

"Heehee, I'm good at managing on a small allowance."

Figuring out how to budget her mana wasn't much different from figuring out how to get by on her meager allowance. And that, at least, was something

Yurika was a master of.

“That really isn’t something you should be bragging about...”

“Koutarou, shouldn’t you be praising her for being useful for once?”

“...Good girl.”

“Aw, shucks, Satomi-san. You can buy me some food later if you want, you know?”

“You really are a strange girl.”

“I’m a magical girl!”

“That’s true.”

And so the three of them decided on a plan. They would first use an illusion spell to get closer to the town, where they would use a transformation spell to turn them into animals. With that settled, only one question remained: what kind of animals would they choose? Each animal had its pros and cons.

“Yurika would be fine as a horse’s rear.”

“No way!”

“Isn’t that your specialty?”

“While I *am* good at it, why would I just be the rear?! That would be too weird!”

While they would stand out less as smaller animals, being small had its disadvantages. The shorter their legs were, for example, the longer it would take them to walk through town. But if they chose an animal too large, they were more likely to be stopped in town. And even if they turned into something strategically small and fast like a bird, it would seem strange that they were flying over town rather than avoiding people. They needed to pick animals that wouldn’t be too suspicious or too slow.

Maybe I was hoping Yurika would be a horse because I’m getting nostalgic...

Koutarou was thinking back to the magician he’d met in the past who transformed into a horse. So despite knowing it was silly, he’d suggested Yurika transform into one too. He relented, however, when his common sense won

out.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Jeez, Satomi-san! You take any opportunity to be mean to me!”

“Realistically speaking, cats and dogs would be the most appropriate.”

When it came to blending in in town and not drawing attention to themselves, pets were the best choice. Forthorthe had cats and dogs the same way Earth did, so it should also be an easier transformation for Yurika since she had a clear picture of the animals in her mind.

“Satomi-san will be a dog, Theia-chan will be a cat, and I’ll be—”

“How about a pony?”

“Satomi-san!”

“Fine. Just make it a chicken.”

“No way! I wanna be a kitty too!”

In the end, they agreed that Koutarou would be a dog while Theia and Yurika would be cats. With that out of the way, the next step was sneaking their way into town with the next group of people to enter. That way, hopefully, the guards would just think they were pets.

For the past several days on Alaia, Koutarou and the girls had only been travelling under the cover of darkness. But with so few people around at night, they would only stand out more now that they’d reached civilization. As such, they strategically waited until it was light out to make their move. And they were in luck. When morning rolled around, there were plenty of people out and about to distract attention from them.

It was now time to set their plan in motion, and phase one was using a simple illusion spell to disguise themselves and get closer to town. Once they were at a comfortable distance, they hid behind cover and waited for the right moment to transform. Then, as animals, they began to make their way towards town. And so far, so good. No one was paying them any mind.

“Woof, woof.”

“Meow.”

Leading the pack was doggy Koutarou, who Yurika had transformed into a big-eyed shiba inu. Following right behind him was kitty Theia, who had taken the form of a Persian cat with beautiful golden fur. And bringing up the rear was Yurika, who was an average cat—other than her pink fur. Her strange appearance was like something straight out of a manga.

Forthorthe had its own breeds of dogs and cats. Technically speaking, they were different species, but they looked close enough to the versions found on Earth that no one would think twice about it. Thanks to that, nobody seemed suspicious of the three animals approaching the gate to the town. The only stares they got were from animal lovers who were just happy to see the cute critters walking by.

“Woof.”

“Mrow.”

However, Koutarou and Theia were panicking. But that was perhaps only natural considering this was the first time they’d ever been dogs and cats. They had trouble adjusting, especially walking on four legs. They were just barely able to manage thanks to their athletic dexterity and coordination, but they were still worried someone might think they were walking strangely.

“Meow, meow!”

Meanwhile, however, Yurika was showing off some magnificent footwork. She had light and delicate steps, moving almost exactly like a normal cat. As it turned out, her splendid performance as a horse’s rear had taught her a thing or two about the way animals moved. Of course horses and cats had completely different gaits, but knowing exactly how to move on four legs gave Yurika a distinct advantage as she pranced in front of her friends.

“Mrow!”

“Woof!”

It was an unusual situation. Usually Yurika was the one stumbling and getting in the way, but right now she was setting the pace for the group. If anything, Koutarou and Theia were the ones holding *her* back. Realizing that, they let her

take the lead as they walked along. While that been part of the plan, it ended up working out in their favor. With Yurika prancing around in front and Koutarou and Theia timidly following behind, they looked like two subordinates reluctantly following their boss around. No one thought anything strange of it. If anything, it was comical.

“Meow!”

But when they finally reached town, all three of them grew tense. The gate was open, but protected by five soldiers—one on either side of the gate, one standing right in front of it, and two in a nearby outpost. The soldiers on either side of the gate were armed and keeping an eye on their surroundings. The soldier standing directly in front of the gate was confirming the identities of people entering the town. And the two soldiers in the outpost were taking a break while keeping tabs on the observational equipment.

As for Koutarou and the girls, the next hurdle in their plan was whether or not they could get past these five soldiers without being stopped. While they were unassuming animals right now, there was still no guarantee that the soldiers would let them through. They might simply get chased off, or worse, put down if the soldiers were cruelhearted. It was a terrifying thought. Terrifying enough, in fact, that Yurika—who had boldly taken the lead so far—was now scared stiff.

“Meeow!”

Even with Koutarou pushing her from behind, she wouldn’t budge. She was completely frozen in place.

“Woof...”

“Meow...”

Realizing that there was nothing they could do, Koutarou and Theia left Yurika behind and continued forward. They only had a few minutes to spare. So while leaving Yurika behind might have seemed callous, they knew they didn’t have time to stand around.

“M-Meeeeeeeeow!”

Seeing Koutarou and Theia walking away, however, Yurika was overcome with new motivation and chased after them. The soldiers were scary, but being left

all alone was even scarier.

“Woof!”

“Meow!”

When they realized that Yurika was chasing after them, Koutarou and Theia looked at each other and yelped. They had intentionally left Yurika behind knowing it would light a fire under her.

“Woof!”

“Meow!”

“Meow...”

That said, they completely understood how Yurika felt. From the perspective of cats and dogs, humans were very large creatures. They were intimidating to be around, and that intimidation only increased the closer they got. By the time the three friends were right in front of the soldiers, their little hearts were pounding. If he wanted to, the soldier at the gate could crush them right here and now.

“Are you little things on your way back home?”

However, the moment the soldier opened his mouth, some of the tension in the air eased up.

“I’ve never seen you guys before. What unusual breeds...”

“They probably left through another gate, wandered off, and just happened to come back this way.”

Fortunately, the soldiers here were kind to animals. And based on the way they were talking, it seemed quite a few cats and dogs lived in town. It wasn’t like the soldiers knew all of them personally, so they didn’t think much of a few pets wandering in or out of town.

“Woof.”

“Well, aren’t you a good boy! Here, come on in.”

“Meow.”

Overjoyed, Koutarou and the girls passed through the gate. Relief surfaced to

take the place of the tension that had a hold over them. They were so happy that they were ready to break out into dance. The only thing that held them back was knowing it would blow their cover and ruin the whole plan. They'd have to keep it together until they were out of sight.

"Did I hear something about unusual breeds?! Where?!"

All of a sudden, however, an unexpected problem reared its head.

"Look, over there. Just by that corner."

"You're right! I've never seen cats or dogs like that before! I'll go take a closer look!"

"Hey, wait! We're on duty!"

"I'll just be a sec, okay?!"

The unexpected problem was one of the soldiers from the outpost—apparently an animal lover—who was now chasing after Koutarou and the girls. He'd come running as soon as he heard his comrade say something about unusual breeds. He was excited to get a look at the unusual animals and couldn't help chasing them down.

"Wait up! I've got some snacks for kitties! And for doggies too, woof, woof!"

"Woof?!"

"Meow!"

"Meow!"

Yurika was the first to take off. To her credit, she was quick to act at times like this. But in terms of speed, Koutarou and Theia had the advantage. They quickly overtook Yurika and left her in the dust.

"Mrrrrrrrrrow!"

"Don't fight me! I just want to get to know you better!"

And unfortunately, Yurika was just slow enough that the soldier was able to catch up to her and grab her. She desperately struggled to escape his grasp, but he was far stronger than she was and forcibly cuddled her in his arms.

"How curious... Is this fur even natural? It's so flashy..."

“Grrrrr!”

“Aw, don’t get so angry. I’m not going to hurt you guys.”

Koutarou turned around and growled at the soldier to try and scare him off, but he wasn’t letting go of Yurika. As expected, a small, adorable shiba wasn’t going to scare anyone.

“Mrrrow!”

Realizing that intimidation wasn’t working, Theia took direct action. She chomped down on the soldier’s sleeve and latched on to him.

“Whoa!”

“Hisssss!”

Surprised, the soldier dropped Yurika, who made a very un-catlike landing by falling directly on her face.

“You guys are really tight-knit, aren’t you?”

“Mrrrrr!”

Though Yurika had gotten lucky and managed to get away, the soldier cut his losses and scooped up Theia. Her fangs were caught on his sleeve, making it impossible for her to run away.

“Mrrrrr! Hisssss!”

“You’re a feisty one, aren’t you? And even more unusual than your pink friend... Let me get a closer look at you.”

Theia struggled even more than Yurika had, but even she couldn’t escape the soldier’s grasp. She was just no match for his size and strength. The difference was too great. It was like normal-sized Theia was trying to fight off a giant.

“Woof!”

Things were looking dire. Not seeing any other option, Koutarou bolted for the soldier knowing he was at a disadvantage. He had to rescue Theia as quickly as possible. But then...

“Whoa! Wh-What?!”

Just as Koutarou leaped for the soldier, there was a giant puff of white smoke. And once it cleared, there was no longer a dog and two cats, but Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia. They'd been waylaid by the soldier just long enough that the remaining time on their transformation spell had run out.

When the smoke dissipated, the soldier was first surprised that the cat in his hands had turned into a girl. He was simply stunned at the surreal spectacle.

"The cat... turned into a person?! Wh-What just happened?!"

The soldier couldn't believe his eyes. Since he'd just been holding the cat, he knew it wasn't just some hologram. That had to mean there was some other sort of technology at work, but the soldier had never heard of any kind of machine or device that could turn a person into a cat.

"Wh-Who are you guys— Ack!"

That was when the second surprise came. Not only had the cat turned into a girl—he recognized the girl.

Princess Theiamillis?! How could it be?!

He was so startled that his voice faltered, but there was no mistaking it. That golden hair, those powerful eyes... This was the seventh princess of the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire, Theiamillis Gre Forthorthe.

Is it just some imposter?! Or is something wrong with me?!

Encountering Princess Theiamillis while on duty on the sixth planet from the sun was certainly a bolt out of the blue. Compared to the surreal experience of seeing a cat turn into a person, something plausible like this was almost even more surprising. The soldier started to worry for his own sanity. But once he started to calm down and think about it...

Wait, if this is the real princess, why is she here? R-Right! There was that report about illegal aliens landing a few days ago!

There was plenty of reason to think the girl before him now was the real Princess Theiamillis. A few days ago, an unidentified spaceship had landed on Alaia. The army had informed the soldiers that there was a chance some of its

crew had actually come down in the nearby forest. As a result, they'd sent a patrol to check it out and increased security at the gate. They were under strict orders to stop and inspect every single person coming through.

The unidentified spaceship belonged to Elfaria's faction, and for some reason, Princess Theiamillis was part of the crew that had gotten separated from it and landed in the woods. A considerable taskforce had been mobilized to capture her. And while the soldier didn't know how she'd transformed into a cat, he was sure that if someone had incredible technology like that, it would be the royal families. It would also explain how she and her cohorts had eluded all the drones and patrolling soldiers in the woods.

The more he thought about it, the more the soldier became convinced that the girl in front of him was none other than Princess Theiamillis. Considering the grander picture, it made perfect sense.

Not good...

The knight in Princess Theiamillis's company instinctively placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. He was instantly ready to defend his lord from capture.

"My, aren't you a pretty one with that long, golden fur! I've never seen a kitty like you before..."

But the soldier didn't try to apprehend the princess. Instead, he continued speaking to her as if she were a cat and slowly set her down on the ground.

"What... are you doing?"

It was now the princess's turn to be surprised. She was still in enemy territory and the soldiers here had orders to capture her on sight. They had their own families to think about, so it would be no small matter to defy those orders... Yet this soldier was letting Princess Theiamillis go.

"I'm sorry for scaring you, little ones. I just pride myself on my love of animals, you see..."

The soldier put his hand on his chest and deeply bowed to the puzzled princess. While his words may have been for a cat, his behavior was without a doubt meant for a princess.

“...Thank you. I won’t forget your loyalty as long as I live...”

The soldier’s loyalty to the royal families was absolute, and he took pride in that. He’d just said it in a way that made it sound like he meant animals so no one overhearing it would get the wrong impression. Realizing that, Princess Theiamillis, thanked him again in a gentle voice.

“Go on. Don’t dillydally. I hear the north side of town is a gathering place for cats, so you’d do well to make your way over there.”

“I will. Thank you for your kindness.”

Princess Theiamillis wiped away the tears forming in her eyes and turned away, running up to the guardian knight who’d been watching over her this whole time. He’d already removed his hand from his sword. In fact, he seemed to have a nostalgic look in his eyes as he smiled both at the princess running up to him and the soldier standing behind her.

“...You’ve helped us out again, Orion. Thank you.”

The knight uttered those parting words as he turned and escorted the princess and the other girl travelling with them away. The soldier simply stood there in place, watching them walk off until he could no longer see them.

“Hey, how long are you going to be playing around?”

“Hmm? Ah, sorry. It was just such an unusual cat, I couldn’t help myself.”

Just as the princess and the others disappeared into the crowd in the distance, one of the soldier’s comrades came running up. He’d been looking for him, apparently worried he’d caught the wrath of a superior officer for shirking his duties. The soldier took one last wistful glance in the direction the princess had disappeared before returning to his post at the gate.

How did that knight know my name...?

The soldier would spend the rest of his shift wondering that, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn’t figure out the answer. He didn’t know, but it made his heart leap with joy for some reason. And that feeling alone told him he’d made the right decision today.



Companions

Wednesday, November 24th

The animal-loving soldier had said that the north side of the town was a gathering place for cats. Koutarou and the others assumed that was a coded way of saying Elfaria's faction had a secret base there. Since the soldier would have to say he'd only met and dealt with a cat, using indirect hints like that was the safest course of action for him. Following his advice, Koutarou and the girls made their way to the north side of town.

"We managed to get here rather easily."

Fortunately, they hadn't run into any problems since the incident at the gate. Things were almost too easy compared to what they'd been through so far, which made Yurika somewhat uneasy.

"It's not like soldiers are patrolling every block in town. You don't see military police in the city in Japan very often, right? Forthorthe is the equivalent of a developed nation on Earth, so think of it in those terms."

"Besides, most of the local forces were sent to investigate the forest."

Theia was right. It was rather uncommon to see military police on duty in populated areas in developed nations. That was because of the ways of war had changed over the centuries. Back when battles were fought with swords and spears, it took a considerable percentage of a nation's population to compose an army that was a force to be reckoned with. But as time passed and weapons changed, that percentage decreased significantly. Even in Forthorthe where knighthood and military service were well respected, the number of soldiers didn't exceed 0.2 percent of the population. By extension, just taking into consideration how the general population outnumbered the military, it was unlikely to see soldiers in the middle of a populated town without good reason. Moreover, any excess troops the town had to spare had already been sent into the woods to look for the wanted princess and her cohorts. The chances of

Theia and the others running into any more soldiers from here on out were extremely low.

“I get that, but how do we meet up with our allies?”

“You weren’t listening at all, were you, Yurika?”

“Heh... heh heh...”

“Don’t worry. I know how the representatives get in touch with one another.”

Since Elfaria’s faction was currently being treated as a group of dissidents, their network and their bases were being kept secret. They had to be extremely cautious about who they met and where, even if it was an ally. As just introducing themselves was dangerous, there was a protocol put into place for exactly that. Theia and the others had been informed of it beforehand, so getting into contact with someone shouldn’t be difficult.

“Koutarou, how does it look today?”

“It looks like today’s signs are signifiers and codes.”

Anyone wishing to get in touch with the faction would stand in a specified place at a specified time with a signifier—in this case, a certain belonging. In response, someone from the local branch would “accidentally” bump into them and say the designated passphrase. If they responded correctly in turn, a connection was established and both parties would know they were with an ally. That was the method of contact for today and today only. It changed on a daily basis to prevent any spies from discovering it and spoiling the whole operation.

The specifics of today’s method involved standing under the clock tower in the middle of the park at 1:40 PM with a bouquet of yellow flowers.

“I just hope everything works out...”

It was currently 1:35, and Koutarou was standing under the pillar on his own. He was dressed in local attire and holding the designated bouquet. Theia and Yurika were hiding nearby, and once Koutarou safely established contact, he’d call them over. He’d thought this was the safest way to protect Theia.

“It’s about time, huh?”

Even if they followed the proper procedure, after all, there was no guarantee they’d actually be able to meet with Elfaria’s people. This could be a false lead, or contact for the day might have been aborted if they suspected a leak or any other foul play. And in the worst case scenario, the local branch of Elfaria’s faction had already been wiped out. An imperial mole could be coming instead. While Koutarou figured that things would probably be okay, he couldn’t help but be nervous. That nervousness only increased as the seconds ticked by and the minute hand on the clock moved closer to the eight. Soon enough, it was the designated time.

Just about then, a ball rolled up to Koutarou’s feet. Its size and the material it was made from reminded Koutarou of a soccer ball. He casually picked it up with his free hand, and a girl wearing what appeared to be Forthorthian athleticwear came running up to him.

“Is this yours?” he asked.

“Thanks for catching it,” the girl said. “And my, what a lovely bouquet! Are you going on a date?”

That was it! The last part of what the girl had said was the initiating passphrase. That meant she had to be the contact for Elfaria’s faction, which surprised Koutarou. Such a young, sporty girl didn’t exactly look like a dissident to him. But when he stopped to think about it, it was rather clever. The Imperial Army would likely overlook a young girl playing with a ball in the park, even if they were scouring the town. Pulling himself together, Koutarou responded with the designated passphrase on his end.

“That was my intention, but it seems like I’ve been stood up. I’d be happy if you’d take these off my hands.”

“Ahh... I wish someone would say that to me outside of work.”

“I would like to try saying it too.”

“Ahaha! Welcome to the Goltrack branch.”

After exchanging passphrases, the girl gave Koutarou a welcoming smile. Koutarou, however, was still on guard. He wanted to be absolutely sure this girl

was on his side. Theia's life was at stake, after all.

"I know this is sudden, but have my friends left a message for me?"

"Ah, yes. Just a moment..."

When Koutarou brought up the message, the girl pulled out a small piece of paper from her pocket. She then read it out loud to him.

"Um... 'Atlas, Caucasus, Hercules. Kabutonga change up!' That's what it says, anyway... What does it mean?"

"It's a sign that they're safe."

After hearing the girl read the note, Koutarou finally relaxed a little. The message she'd read was one of the codes that Koutarou and the girls had decided on beforehand. It was a sign that they were safe and that the person who'd come to get him was worthy of trust.

While it was most regrettable, not every member of Elfaria's faction could inherently be trusted. There was always a chance that their family had been taken hostage and they were being forced to do things against their will, or even that they'd been taken out and replaced with an imperial mole. That's why Koutarou and the girls had decided on signs to let each other know if the contact they came across was trustworthy or not. It was Kiriha's idea to take a few extra precautions, just in case.

Since the girl who'd made contact with Koutarou knew both the faction passphrase and the unique code decided on by Koutarou and the other girls, she was most likely a genuine ally since it was rather unlikely that both had been leaked. Moreover, the contents of the unique code told Koutarou that Kiriha and the rest of the Ohime crew were safe and sound. That was what finally put Koutarou at ease.

After establishing contact with a representative from the local branch of Elfaria's faction, Koutarou met up with Theia and Yurika and headed for the secret base. While it was a secret base on a technicality, it was located in the middle of town and wasn't especially large. It wasn't really much bigger than a typical office, and bore barely any resemblance to a base. There were fewer

than ten people there, making it seem more like the local branch of a corporation than an underground political organization.

“I’m sorry it’s not much to look at. I wish I could have invited you somewhere more comfortable.”

The elderly man who served as the head of the branch was well aware their small base wasn’t very hospitable. Especially not for a princess of Forthorthe.

“Think nothing of it. We’re the ones who are imposing on you, after all. Besides, after crawling through the forest for days, just having a roof over our heads is most welcome.”

Theia, on the other hand, didn’t mind the modest conditions. If anything, she was quite pleased with them. Looking at her profile, Koutarou knew exactly what she was thinking about.

That face... She’s definitely comparing this to that movie we watched the other day...

Koutarou was thinking of a war movie he’d watched with Theia. It was about a resistance force that had a shabby base with exactly this kind of atmosphere. He knew that’s what Theia was thinking about. And Theia glancing around the place before smiling at Koutarou only confirmed it. She just couldn’t say it out loud because of the situation and her status.

“You flatter us, Your Highness.”

The branch chief took Theia’s words as a sign of her generosity and kindness, and cracked a relieved smile at the gesture. So far, everything was going smoothly.

If anything’s an issue...

Koutarou was far more concerned about Yurika than he was Theia. After the past few harrowing days and constantly using her magic, Yurika had reached her limit. Koutarou could tell, because as soon as she entered the base, she walked promptly over to the couch in the corner, flopped over on it, and passed right out.

Sleep well, Yurika. You did good...

Koutarou could easily imagine how draining the whole experience had been for her. He knew good and well how unfit she was for fighting, yet she'd done her job and protected Theia with magic until the end. There was a lot to praise, and nothing to complain about. That's why Koutarou felt like Yurika had earned her right to sleep.

"Now then, let us move on to the topic at hand."

"You're right. There's no time to spare."

While Koutarou was admiring Yurika, Theia and the branch chief began discussing the real reason they'd come here.

"This is day five for us on Alaia, but we've been in the forest this entire time. I'd like to know what's happened since we touched down."

It had been five days since Koutarou and the others had been separated from Ohime and landed in the woods of Alaia. And the entire time, they'd not only been isolated from their allies, but from all of society. That's why Theia wanted to be filled in on everything they'd missed. She felt that would be the first step in deciding how to proceed from here.

"Cutting straight to the chase... I'm afraid war has already broken out."

The branch chief answered Theia in a very solemn tone. It was grave news indeed to hear that one's country had gone to war—especially for a princess. Theia immediately stood up from her chair and slammed her hands on the table.

"What?! Tell me the details!"

"Well, technically..."

The branch chief began explaining at Theia's behest, starting with what happened the day she and her allies landed on Alaia.

At first, Ohime was simply treated as a ship that had illegally entered the planet, despite Vandarion hearing from Elexis that Elfaria was onboard. He knew this was his chance to capture her, so he kept things quiet from his own allies for maximum maneuverability. Or, at least, that was the plan. Things

changed when the army let Ohime escape, and Vandarion went public with the news that Elfaria had eluded the Imperial Army and returned home. He then demanded that Elfaria's faction hand her over immediately.

Since Elfaria was a wanted criminal, already having been accused of embezzlement and murder, her faction should have no recourse but to hand her over to the army. Lord Pardomshiha, however, took a brave stand and refused to do so. He claimed that he couldn't in good faith hand over the empress knowing that she would be framed with false evidence. In short, he was indirectly indicating that the real crimes had been committed by the military's top brass.

This was divisive news to the general population. There were those who believed Elfaria was innocent, those who believed she was guilty, and those who believed the court should decide. Public opinion was split respectively in an almost even 4:4:2 ratio. Since the corrupt military would be seeing to Elfaria's trial, however, that pitted the majority of public opinion against her.

The military used that to their advantage and branded Elfaria's factions as a seditious terrorist organization for sheltering Elfaria and obstructing justice. That was bad enough as it was, but it also entitled Vandarion to begin taking military action against them. While the public wasn't largely in favor of such extreme methods, Vandarion billed it as a necessary measure to see Elfaria brought to justice. Really, this was exactly what he'd wanted. Everything was going according to plan.

As the branch chief briefed Theia on what had happened, her expression gradually grew darker and darker. It was a perfectly natural reaction, all things considered. Her mother was being framed for crimes she hadn't committed, she'd been chased off of her throne, and she was about to have her beloved country stolen from her by a treacherous villain. By the time the branch chief finished explaining all this, Theia was enraged.

"Curse you, Vandarion! I won't let you get your way, you bastard!"

Having nothing else to take her anger out on, she slammed her fist into the desk. Though petite, the small princess packed quite a punch. The table jumped

under her blow, almost as if it had been startled.

“P-Please calm down, Your Highness!”

“How could I be calm right now?!”

As enraged as she was, Theia lost sight of herself and continued shouting. She was hardly listening to the elderly branch chief’s reason. If anything, it fueled her fiery rage that threatened to burn down the whole building.

“Your Highness! Please stay your anger!”

“We’ve protected and loved this nation for generations only to be stabbed in the back! Just how do you think that feels?! And now—”

“Calm down, Theia!”

Thud!

The only thing that seemed to knock any sense into Theia’s head was Koutarou’s fist.

“Ow!”

The intense jolt momentarily quenched the flames of Theia’s rage.

“Don’t take it out on the branch chief! Who do you think the real enemy is?!”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! You don’t know anything!”

However, the smoldering flames quickly flared back up. Half of them were now directed at Koutarou, primarily in the form of a right hook. Koutarou took the blow squarely to his cheek without trying to block it and without recoiling even a single step. He simply stared Theia dead in the eyes.

“...Are you seriously saying that to me, Theia?”

Those words shook her to the core, allowing her a chance to get a hold of herself.

“Ah...”

It was only after she cooled off a bit that she could feel and appreciate the warmth just past her fist—warmth coming from the heart of a man who meant a great deal to Forthorthe and vice versa. Of course he knew the agony Theia

was going through. In fact, he might even feel it more acutely than she did.

“I’m sorry, Koutarou. Allow me to formally apologize for my language. I’m also sorry for hitting you in my outburst.”

Theia collected herself. She was embarrassed by how foolishly she’d behaved. It wasn’t something she could simply brush off with a smile.

“It’s fine. I know how you feel. Besides... this is really my fault for not settling things properly in the first place. You have every right to be mad at me.”

Koutarou flashed a bitter smile. He knew that the Magical Kingdom of Folsaria and the People of the Earth were a result of his inability to fully deal with Maxfern. And now that he’d stolen the power of both nations, Vandarion was running amok. That’s why Koutarou wasn’t angry with Theia; he was angry with himself too. He was responsible for all this after abandoning Forthorthe two thousand years ago.

“You idiot, this isn’t all about you! The Mastir family can’t rely on you forever!”

“...As you wish, my princess.”

“Grrr... You’re as stubborn as ever!”

As his friend, Theia was ready to butt heads with Koutarou and be scolded for her childishness. But Koutarou never forgot his position and continued to carry himself as a knight. As a girl, that frustrated Theia. But as a princess, it made her extremely happy. It was a confusing position to be in.

“Make sure you apologize to the branch chief.”

“I will!”

“Good.”

Once he was sure Theia was back to her normal self, Koutarou let her be and walked over to Yurika, who was the bigger problem right now. Watching him walk away with a dissatisfied expression, Theia took a deep breath and turned back to the branch chief.

“I apologize for losing my temper. This is all new territory for me...”

“Think nothing of it, Your Highness. You’re only human, and a heart is nothing to be ashamed of having.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“As a citizen, it’s rather reassuring to see you get so angry on behalf of the people.”

Fortunately, the branch chief wasn’t upset with Theia. He knew good and well that her anger was righteous. It was for the country, its people, and its rightful empress. So while her outburst had surprised him, it was indeed reassuring.

“More importantly, Your Highness, what house is that knight from?”

“You mean Koutarou? Is there something you wish to know about him?”

“Such knights are unusual in this day and age... Pardon any impropriety, but I don’t believe there are many who would dare to correct a princess anymore. I have to say it piqued my interest.”

As far as the branch chief knew, there were hardly any knights bold enough to scold royalty. There were maybe five, and even that was a generous estimate. Lord Pardomshiha was famous for it, and Lord Wenranka might stake his life on it if need be. A select few others came to mind, but they weren’t allies in the present situation. By that logic, this young knight was likely from Pardomshiha or Wenranka, but the crests on his swords and armor didn’t match either band. That’s what had made the branch chief curious about his identity.

“I know, right?!”

The branch chief’s inquiry made Theia’s eyes sparkle. She grinned ear to ear like she was the one being praised.

“He is a knight’s knight—to a fault! He’s fiercely loyal to the royal families and the very incarnation of chivalry! But because of that, there are times when he won’t listen to me! He’s a most troublesome knight!”

Theia began explaining what kind of man Koutarou was with large, exaggerated gestures. Again, it was almost like she was boasting about herself.

“That makes him even more interesting. If it’s not too much for me to ask, what house does he hail from?”

With the princess speaking so highly of the strange knight she'd brought with her, the branch chief grew more curious about him.

"Sadly, I cannot tell you that yet. He's in a difficult position, so I can't reveal his origins just yet. I will when the time is right, however."

Revealing that Koutarou was the Blue Knight would rock all of Forthorthe. It wasn't something that could be done lightly during a coup d'état. In fact, revealing Koutarou's identity now would only raise doubts about the legitimacy of such claims. Theia would prefer to wait until Vandarion was taken down and the coup d'état put to an end.

"Is that so? Then I shall look forward to it."

The branch chief was still interested in Koutarou's identity, but since the princess said she couldn't reveal it, he would press the issue no further. Besides, he'd already heard half of what he wanted to know.

"Heh, you'll never believe it when you hear it."

"Is it going to shock this old heart of mine?"

"You would do well to have a resuscitation kit on standby just in case."

"Ahaha, I'll do just that."

The branch chief could tell—even without Theia saying anything—that Koutarou was a very special knight. He clearly had a close relationship with the princess. Moreover, the branch chief recognized the crests on Koutarou's swords. He knew they were Alaia's and Theia's. He suspected that Koutarou was Theia's lover, so if he patiently waited for their wedding, he would undoubtedly get to learn his true identity. All would be revealed in due time. There was no need to rush it.

Some time after Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia arrived at the branch base, they were finally able to get in touch with the rest of their friends. They were limited to electronic communication, however, as meeting face to face would require additional time and precautions. The real reunion would have to wait.

"Ruth, how have you been doing?"

“Your Highness! Master!”

The first one to appear was Ruth. She was both Theia’s loyal retainer and her close childhood friends. Their bond ran deep, and so did Ruth’s worry for her princess. Tears welled in her eyes the moment she saw she was safe.

“Is that really something you should be crying about?”

Theia smiled at the hologram of Ruth, which was detailed enough to show every single tear streaming down her cheeks.

“It *is*, Your Highness! You’re always so reckless!”

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Ruth.”

Theia had advanced knowledge that Ohime had reached Pardomshiha territory, so she wasn’t quite as overwhelmed to see Ruth. Nevertheless, seeing the face of her childhood friend safe and sound lifted a great weight off Theia’s shoulders. She could only imagine how worried Ruth must have been, and apologized sincerely for it.

“I’m just glad you’re safe, Your Highness.”

Once Ruth calmed down a bit, Theia could see her wipe away her tears through the hologram. Her focus then shifted off of Theia briefly.

“Come on... Come closer.”

“Oh?”

Realizing the significance of Ruth’s furtive glance, Theia grabbed Koutarou by the arm and dragged him in front of the communication device. Now Ruth should be able to see both of them in the hologram on her side.

“Go on. Say something.”

“Me?”

Theia knew Ruth had been worried about Koutarou too, so she wanted him to personally tell her that he was fine. Since they were still in an emergency situation as far as Koutarou was concerned, however, he was more than happy to stand back and leave all the talking to Theia. Needless to say, he was absolutely baffled when she dragged him in front of the communication device.

He simply stared at her with a blank look that said, “Why are you doing this?”

“You idiot!”

Wham!

“Ouch!”

Irritated, Theia let Koutarou know how dense he was being with a swift punch.

“It’s not like I’m telling you to go have a casual conversation! Just show her your face tell her you’re okay!”

“Okay, okay. I get it. You don’t have to get so mad.”

Realizing that this was probably some sort of girl thing, Koutarou caved and did what he was told. He sat down in the chair Theia had been using and began talking to Ruth via the hologram.

“Well, you heard her... I’m safe too. Are all of you doing okay, Ruth-san?”

“Yes, Master. Never been better.”

“That has me worried for a different reason.”

“My... Teehee.”

A bright smile blossomed on Ruth’s lips. While she’d already heard that Koutarou was fine, it wasn’t until she saw his face that it truly sunk in. Only then was she able to rest easy.

“Good. That’s more like it.”

Theia embraced Koutarou from behind and rested her chin on his shoulder. She looked like Sanae always did. And speaking of Sanae... It was right about then that her voice came over the comms line from off screen.

“Koutarou, Koutarou, look! I caught a weird lizard!”

“Eek!”

Suddenly, a small, unfamiliar reptile appeared right in front of Ruth’s face. Startled, she jumped backward right as Sanae entered the hologram frame.

“Isn’t it cool?!”

“Whoa, that’s a big one. Where did you catch it?”

“In the forest outside. There were a bunch of weird animals, but I caught this one because it was the weirdest.”

“I want to see it when I get over there, so make sure you take good care of it until then.”

“Okay!”

“Gwarh!”

With an energetic reply from Sanae and the strange lizard, they both disappeared from the hologram as quickly as they’d come. In their place appeared Maki and Nana. The girls from the Ohime crew had decided to all say hi to Koutarou two at a time.

“Satomi-kun, how is Yurika?”

“She’s exhausted. She’s been on edge this entire time and using her magic pretty much nonstop. Right now she’s sleeping over there.”

“Satomi-san, could I see her if possible?”

As fellow magical girls, Maki and Nana were worried about Yurika. They knew she was safe, but they were anxious to see how she was holding up.

“Okay, um... Hang on...”

Koutarou knew how they must feel and was happy to oblige, but he was unfamiliar with how to work the communication device. That posed an interesting issue that stymied him for a good minute.

“Here. Something like this should do the trick.”

Sensing him struggle, Theia—her head still resting on his shoulder—reached out a hand and turned the camera so Maki and Nana could see the sleeping Yurika.

“Bwahaha, not so fast! This is *my* baked potato...”

Passed out on the couch, Yurika was lying there with her mouth half open. She’d kicked off the blanket and was sleeping in a cockamamie position, scratching her exposed stomach. She was even talking to herself. And while the

communication device couldn't pick up what she was saying, Maki and Nana had no trouble guessing.

"Oh... Oh my..."

"That's just like Yurika-chan."

Seeing Yurika like that, Maki and Nana both smiled wryly. They were concerned when they heard she'd passed out from exhaustion, but as far as they could tell, everything was perfectly normal—for Yurika, anyway. On one hand, it was a relief. But on the other, Maki and Nana were a little unsure how to feel about her acting this way under the circumstances.

"Well... I'm glad to see Yurika-chan is safe too."

"Make sure all three of you make it here in tip-top shape."

"Thanks, you two. I'll let Yurika know you're thinking of her."

Maki and Nana disappeared with a conflicted expression on their faces that wasn't quite a smile and wasn't quite a frown. Koutarou and Theia understood why, and couldn't help but feel a little responsible for it.

"Satomi-kun, Theiamillis-san."

Following Maki and Nana was Harumi.

"Hey, Sakuraba-senpai. Long time no see."

"I heard that you were stuck in the forest for days. Did you manage okay?"

"Well, Theia and I did, at least. If nothing else, we have confidence in our stamina."

"Excuse me, Koutarou? I have confidence in more than just my stamina, I'll have you know."

"Chill, Theia. It's just a saying. It doesn't mean that you're ugly or stupid or anything."

"Then I'll let it slide."

"Ahaha... It's wonderful to see you two in such high spirits."

"What about you, Sakuraba-senpai? I'm sure things have been rough on your

end too. I know you're not used to living like this."

In Koutarou's mind, there was no one more ill suited for battle than sweet Harumi. In terms of aptitude, Yurika was actually probably worse off. But Harumi had no experience and no training, which made her Koutarou's biggest worry.

"At times like these, Alaia-sama's memories are a boon."

"Oh, no wonder you seem so calm."

Fortunately, Harumi had Alaia's memories to rely on. While Harumi had never seen real battle before, Alaia had survived that and so much more. Her memories gave Harumi some perspective and helped her cope with the difficult situation at hand.

"Will you two get on with it already?"

"Hey, you don't have to sound so spiteful!"

"Heehee."

Harumi giggled once more at Koutarou and Theia's banter before disappearing from the hologram. A seemingly ill-humored Clan appeared to take her place.

"...You just had to go and leave me behind again, didn't you, Veltlion?"

"What now, all of a sudden?"

"Even though you said you needed me..."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter."

"I'm sure that's what you'll say next time and the time after that, too."

Clan saw herself as Koutarou's partner, so it was painful to get left behind. Koutarou could tell she was upset, because her hologram was downright glowering at him. Seeing her like that, however, Theia flashed an impish smile.

"Clan, you're better off just admitting that you were worried. For your own sake."

"I—"

“You were worried, weren’t you?”

“That’s not true at all!”

“I beg to differ,” interjected Kiriha as she suddenly appeared next to Clan in the hologram. “Clan-dono has been restlessly pacing back and forth around this communications device these past few days. Just like Koutarou did when Clan-dono was nowhere to be found.”

Kiriha cracked a mischievous grin that easily rivaled Theia’s as she revealed Clan’s heart in her stead.

“Kii?! Th-Th-That’s all a lie, Veltlion!” Clan protested, her face bright red.

“Is it *really*, Clan-dono?”

“W-Well, you spent the entire time staring at that card!”

“So you’re not denying it?”

“Ugh...”

Despite Clan’s vehement shouting and attempted counterattack, Kiriha was unfazed. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying pushing Clan’s buttons.

“I didn’t think so. Koutarou, why don’t you say something?”

“That girl...”

For better or for worse, Koutarou understood how Clan felt and reluctantly intervened.

“Clan, I’m sorry for worrying you, but we’re all fine over here. I’ll make sure to bring you with me next time, so cut me some slack this once.”

“...That’s a promise.”

Clan wore a stern frown as she exited the hologram frame, but she wasn’t nearly as unhappy as she appeared to be. She’d only fussed at Koutarou because she was worried. Kiriha saw right through her and saw her off with a smile before turning her mischievous grin on Koutarou.

“Now, don’t you have anything to say to me too?”

In the past, Kiriha had said that she would spend the rest of her life with

Koutarou, so she was also rather unhappy that he'd left her behind. However, Koutarou knew that Kiriha's mischievousness was insincere when things were this serious. It was just her way of saying she was happy that he and the others were safe. So instead of caving to her teasing, he held his ground and smiled back at her.

"You want me to say that here and now?"

"No, let's save it when it's just the two of us."

"Sounds good."

"Yeah."



It seemed Koutarou had played the right card, because Kiriha then passed the comms device on to the next person without much of a fuss. Koutarou knew what that really meant, however. Kiriha would only acquiesce like that when she was planning on giving him hell later. He shuddered a little at the thought.

“Listen to this, Theia-chan, Satomi-kun!”

The next to appear was Shizuka, who looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Hey, Landlord-san. What’s up?”

“Tell us what happened.”

“When I was helping out by carrying some of the luggage, I stepped right through a floorboard!”

It came as no surprise that Shizuka’s weight was the source of her tears. Alunaya had used up so much mana during reentry that she now weighed over 150 kilograms. Since she was away from the scale in her apartment, it didn’t bother her as much as normal... until tragedy struck. A floorboard in the base had given way under the combined weight of her and all the luggage she was carrying, sending her crashing down to the floor below.

“And now everyone just thinks I’m heavy!”

No one else carrying luggage had the same problem. Shizuka was the only one who’d fallen, and she’d been difficult to help back up through the hole she’d made. Thanks to that, rumors began to spread about the girl who weighed a hundred times heavier than she looked. Was her weight the only thing heavy, or was her personality equally so? Whatever the reason, this was a living nightmare to Shizuka.

“I’ll never get married now! Waaah!”

“Now, now... Calm down, Landlord-san. It’s not like you’re *really* that heavy.”

“But no one here knows that! Augh, I could just die!”

“Listen, everyone’s got their own image of what an ideal weight is.”

“I told her the same thing, but she’s been absolutely inconsolable...”

“I don’t care if dragons think I’m skinny!”

“Ah... haha...”

Koutarou found himself unable to respond with anything other than a forced laugh. Over the past year, he’d learned that women could be dangerous creatures in situations like this. He didn’t dare make the wrong move.

“Now that it’s come to this, you’ll just have to marry me, Satomi-kun!”

“Don’t you worry. Everything will be fine when we return to Earth, Landlord-san.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll take care of me if it’s not?”

“If you’re fine with that.”

“Okay, then it’s a promise.”

“You bet.”

With Koutarou’s reassurance, Shizuka was finally able to regain her cool. Meanwhile, Koutarou let out a sigh of relief. He wanted the worldly Shizuka to always be bright and cheerful.

“Then this is goodbye for now. Make sure you get over here quick, okay? Everyone’s waiting.”

“Yeah. See you soon.”

“See you.”

Shizuka’s hologram disappeared with a smile on her face. After seeing her off, Theia silently stared at Koutarou.

“...What?”

“It’s nothing.”

If Shizuka intentionally kept herself from getting a boyfriend when they returned to Earth, just what would happen? Theia realized the significance of the casual promise Koutarou had made to Shizuka, but she chose not to say

anything about it.

“Theia, Layous-sama.”

Finally, the last to appear in hologram form was Theia’s mother, Elfaria. In her case, however, she wasn’t just interested in saying hello and seeing how they were doing. She wanted to discuss plans with them.

“Mother! It’s been so long!”

“Yeah, it’s good to see you safe, Elle. If you don’t mind cutting to the chase... how are things?”

Bypassing greetings and pleasantries, Koutarou got straight down to business. The bright expression he’d had on his face while talking to the other girls was instantly gone and he now looked quite serious. Indeed, he no longer looked like Koutarou, but the legendary Blue Knight.

I tried my best to keep him from having to make that face, but in that case...

If Koutarou was getting serious, Elfaria would too. Her cheeky smile faded into a regal, commanding look. This was Empress Elfaria, and she began explaining the situation at Koutarou’s behest. There was a lot of ground to cover, much of which was urgent.

“Sadly, I can’t say things are going well. Public opinion is split on me, but the hold-outs trying to remain neutral on the matter are indirectly giving the military the support they need.”

Koutarou had learned as much from the branch chief. Public opinion was divided on Elfaria’s innocence, but there was a considerable part of the population that believed the court should decide whether or not she was guilty. Asking for a trial, however, meant they were unwittingly playing right into the military’s hands.

“If this goes to court, the military’s going to bury you with lies and fabricated evidence. But then again, if you evade the justice system, the military will just use that as an excuse to come after you.”

“I’m afraid they already are. Skirmishes are breaking out all over.”

The military had only taken action after forging sufficient evidence against

Elfaria. Assured they'd be victorious in a trial, they'd grown much bolder and even began attacking. They were mostly making their move in rural Forthorthe—that is, primarily out of the Forthorthian solar system—but they were even starting to stick their claws into more populated areas. Alaia had actually seen the least of it so far because of the resistance it was putting up to the military's presence.

“But didn't you say you had an ace up your sleeve if we made it here to Alaia, Elle?”

“Yes. I was talking about the fake evidence the military has concocted to try and bring me to trial. I have a lead on that, and if it all works out, we can bring their whole operation to light.”

“But won't they be on guard for that?”

“They should be. They'll probably initiate a large-scale offensive to try and pin us down and keep us from doing much other than defending ourselves. In order to prevent that, we'll need to appeal to the citizenry and win their support so we can keep the military in check.”

Things had been utter chaos when Elfaria was first detained by the military and kept on house arrest under the false pretense of illness. Elfaria had played her cards wisely and used that time to gather as much information as she could on what was happening. That included tidbits about the evidence that had been fabricated against her, and by chasing down the clues she had, she was slowly getting closer and closer to the truth. She was sure, however, the military would go on the offense before they let her get to the bottom of everything and expose them.

In order to counteract that, Elfaria needed to return home to Planet Forthorthe. If she could appeal to the citizens directly, she was sure she could win over enough support to at least stall the military. That would give her time to gather more evidence about the military's deceit and gather more allies should worst come to worst. That was something that Elfaria wouldn't be able to do from Earth.

“I'll probably hold a press conference to address the citizens before long. We're currently making preparations for that.”

“Things sure are complicated... Thinking back on it, the fight against Maxfern was simple by comparison. He was an easy to understand villain.”

Koutarou crossed his arms and began pondering the situation. Two thousand years ago, Maxfern had staged a rather straightforward coup d'état. All they'd needed to do to stop it was defeat Maxfern. But things were different this time... Vandarion's coup was silently making progress under the surface, and the citizens didn't even realize yet that he was the mastermind behind it. Taking him out right now might not even make a difference.

“Layous-sama only needed to be a hero, after all.”

“This time I'm only a stagehand... Leave Theia to me. I'll make sure she gets to you in one piece.”

“Please do.”

Elfaria's Achilles heel was her daughter, Theia. Elfaria had so far taken the challenge of the coup by the horns with indomitable resolve, but she didn't know if she could keep it up if her daughter's life was in danger. Whether or not Koutarou would be able to protect Theia or not would greatly affect the outcome of things.

“And what happens after we get there?”

“Most likely, we're in for a showdown with Imperial Army troops sent by Lord Vandarion.”

Vandarion's best shot at victory would be suppressing Elfaria before she had a chance to appeal to the people of Forthorthe. Even if she got to make a speech or two, it would still take some time before the public opinion shifted in her favor and she began winning the support of knights. As long as Vandarion finished the job before then, victory would be his. And to make sure that happened, he would undoubtedly be going on the offensive.

“...Okay. Have everyone over there start preparing as well.”

Those words weighed heavily on Koutarou as he spoke them. He was telling the people he wanted to keep as far away from battle as possible to get ready to fight. Ultimately, it was the best way to secure the peace for everyone, but Koutarou wasn't about to use that as an excuse. He knew that he was asking

the girls to risk their lives, and he was prepared to take responsibility for that when this was all over.

“Koutarou.”

That was when Theia, still clinging to Koutarou from behind, put a little more strength into her arms and whispered into his ear...

“Mother and I will share that responsibility. You don’t need to carry it alone.”

Theia’s whisper conveyed an adamant will and deep kindness. Win or lose, they would be together. That was her resolution.

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

And so Koutarou resolved himself as well. He would win this battle alongside Theia, Elfaria, and their many friends.

From there, things progressed on a very practical level. And in that regard, Theia and the branch chief were more useful than Koutarou. They discussed how to safely transport Theia and other logistics. Apart from his combat knowledge and general battlefield tactics, Koutarou was fairly oblivious as to life in modern Forthorthe. Because of that, he decided to take a step back and let the major players handle things while he listened in and took care of the exhausted Yurika.

“Blurrrgh...”

“Jeez, come on. You’re accompanying a princess, so could you keep it together?”

Koutarou wiped Yurika’s the drool off of Yurika’s face with a handkerchief. She seemed to be having a dream about food, which historically speaking meant that she’d demand something to eat when she woke up. In anticipation of that, Koutarou had brought some bottled water and a simple meal to leave by her bedside. It was a small kindness only Koutarou—who’d been her roommate for over a year now—would have thought of.

“Mother, we’re already resupplied, so wouldn’t it be best to begin heading your way on our own? If we take too large a guard, it will only weaken the

forces here.”

“Theia, I know how you feel... but it will be dangerous if Vandarion finds out that you’re travelling on your own. You three alone will be an easy target.”

“At the very least, Your Highness, please use one of our vehicles.”

“Very well... That will do.”

The branch head suggested that Theia and her party use one of the faction’s vehicles to reach the main base in the heart of Pardomshiha territory. Koutarou’s armor and Theia’s Combat Dress had been restored and resupplied, so they were now perfectly capable of travelling on their own. But from a practical standpoint, it would be safer for them to use transportation. It seemed even simple tasks like getting around became an ordeal in times of war.

“Mmph... Hrm? Sha... Shatomi-shan?”

“Oh, you awake now, Yurika?”

“Huh? Where am I...?”

As the transportation discussion was reaching an end, Yurika at last woke up. She’d been asleep every since they reached the branch office, so she had absolutely no idea what was currently happening.

“This is one of the bases Elfaria’s supporters are running, remember? You collapsed as soon as we got here.”

“Huh... Yeah, that does sort of ring a bell.”

Koutarou’s words helped clear up Yurika’s foggy memories and got her mind running again. She only just barely remembered making it to the base, but more importantly, she remembered something very pressing that had been bothering her.

“Satomi-san, is everyone okay?!”

“Relax. We managed to get in touch with them and they’re all fine.”

“Really?”

“Look over there. See? Theia’s talking to her mom right now.”

“Oh thank god...”

It was her friends that were on her mind, and they were the first thing that Yurika thought of again once she was fully awake. Just hearing Koutarou say they were fine wasn't enough to fully convince her, but seeing Theia talking to Elfaria over the communication device put her anxious heart at ease. Thanks to that, she let out a sigh of relief and her usual smile appeared on her face.

Rrrumble!

It was then that Yurika's second most pressing concern reared its head.

"Eh... heh heh..."

"You know, it's sort of comforting that you never change, Yurika. Go on. Eat up."

"Haha, don't mind if I do..."

Even the shameless Yurika was embarrassed by her stomach growling at such a time, so she tried to laugh it off as Koutarou handed her something to eat. She seemed to get over it quickly, however, and dug right in.

"Thank you for the food! Hom..."

But just as Yurika took a bite of the Forthorthian-style sandwich, the door to the secret base swung open with a bang.

"Grandpa!"

It was the girl that had guided Koutarou and the others here. Her sudden entrance, however, had startled Yurika so badly that she began choking on her sandwich.

"Hmgh?! Mnmnm!"

"Here. Drink this."

But Koutarou was used to this. He had a hunch that she was going to choke on her food after a surprise like that, so he already had a drink in his hand ready to go.

"Gulp, gulp... Ahhh! I thought I was gonna die there."

Thanks to Koutarou's insight and resourcefulness, Yurika would live to see another day. She then promptly went back to eating her sandwich as she looked

back over at the girl who'd burst in. Koutarou did the same.

"Bad news, grandpa!"

"Settle down and mind your manners, young lady. You are in the audience of Her Majesty and Her Highness."

"B-But it's really important!"

"I take no offense. What is it?"

Normally, it was customary to greet royalty before all else when in their presence—and the young girl certainly knew that as the granddaughter of a local leader of Elfaria's faction. That meant that whatever was going on, it was serious enough that she'd forgotten her manners. Sensing that, Theia skipped past the usual formalities and bade her speak.

"The Imperial Army... I-I mean the coup d'état forces are transporting weapons this way in some kind of trailer! They're apparently weapons for fighting us—they just haven't been assembled yet! We got word from another branch that we should take out the trailer immediately!"

The urgent news the young girl had brought concerned the coup d'état army's new weapon—a secretly developed mobile weapon that was built in components so that it could be easily transported and assembled on site. That made it especially useful for surprise attacks, and that's exactly what the faction members who'd spotted it were sure they were up to. It was a lucky discovery. If they hadn't caught it, the base would have been in for a nasty surprise.

"Theia!"

"It's possible! If we don't make the first move, something terrible will happen!"

Elexis was the first person to pop up in Koutarou's and Theia's minds when they heard the words new weapon.

If it's Warlord and improved Motor Knights... The unprepared faction fighters will be totally destroyed!

The mobile weapons Elexis made had put Koutarou through the wringer more than once before. Just having those on the battlefield was dangerous, but Elexis

now had access to magic and spiritual energy technology. Who knew what kind of improvements and upgrades he'd given them? Just thinking about it sent a chill down everyone's spine.

"Mother, that trailer contains new DKI weapons! If we don't strike first, we'll pay the price later!"

"DKI...? I understand. Let's send a squad."

"Koutarou and I will go with them!"

"No, Theia. Continue as planned and make your way here."

"But—"

"If the weapons are still disassembled, then there's no reason for the two of you to sortie. In fact, this might even be a trap to lure you out."

"But we're going up against—"

"Please calm down, Princess Theiamillis. I believe Her Majesty is right."

"Koutarou..."

Hearing Koutarou speak so formally brought Theia to her senses. She couldn't just ignore him when he addressed her as the Blue Knight. He then walked over to her and explained his reasoning calmly and concisely.

"This timing is too coincidental. Information about the weapon transport was likely leaked on purpose when the army realized we'd eluded their grasp."

Koutarou and Elfaria both feared that this was a trap to capture the rebel group that had landed in the woods of Alaia. It was uncertain that Vandarion knew Theia was among them, but at the very least, he knew that they were important allies of Elfaria's. In other words, they were strong bargaining chips. Vandarion was probably dying to get his hands on them to use them against Elfaria, and taking that into consideration, there was a not insignificant chance the news of the weapon transport was a trap. Elfaria's allies, whoever they were, were likely strong enough that they might show up themselves to deal with the problem.

"A long range attack will suffice if our only goal is to take out a trailer. If they block it, then that means they were prepared for us and it's a trap. Give the

order to retreat immediately.”

Their goal wasn't to attack the military; they were simply eliminating a single trailer disguised as a civilian vehicle. Cannons, missiles, or unmanned crafts should be more than enough for the job. That is, unless the convoy with the trailer had countermeasures ready and waiting. That would be a sufficient sign that they were prepared for an attack and the whole operation was a setup. In that case, the faction forces would retreat. It would be a simple in-and-out operation either way, so Koutarou saw no reason for him and Theia to go. If anything, the two of them showing their faces would only make the job more dangerous.

“Yeah... You're probably right, Koutarou. We should prioritize rendezvousing with the others.”

Koutarou's line of thinking was perfectly reasonable, so Theia decided to relent and continue on their previous plan to meet up with Elfaria and the rest of the Ohime crew. Giving her a slight smile, Koutarou put his hand on Theia's shoulder and whispered so only she could hear him.

“I understand how you feel. You don't want to put your soldiers—your citizens—at risk, do you?”

“I really don't...”

“Then let's hurry up and go take care of Elle. If we don't, Vandarion's just going to keep playing tricks like this.”

If they continued to be get distracted by the smaller events unfolding around them, the body count in the long run would only be higher. If they really wanted to protect the people of Forthorthe, they should get a move on and put a stop to the fighting as soon as possible.

“I'm sorry. I'm just a foolish princess who can only see what's right in front of her.”

Having finally recollected herself thanks to Koutarou, Theia flashed a smile. It was an embarrassed and self-deprecating one, but Koutarou nodded approvingly. After that, his expression returned to that of the Blue Knight.

“It must be in your blood. The people of the Mastir family have been like that

since long ago.”

Alaia, Charl, Elfaria, Theia... As far as Koutarou knew, all of them had fought desperately to protect their people and shed bitter tears for the lives they couldn't save.

“And that's precisely why we knights take such pride in serving the Mastirs. I'm sure the citizens feel the exact same way.”

Because the leaders of the Mastir family cared deeply for the lives of each and every one of their people, both the knights and citizens alike felt there was meaning in staking their lives to protect them. It was exactly why they'd risen up two thousand years ago, and Koutarou believed they would do the same today.

“Thank you, Koutarou.”

“You should tell your citizens that once this is over.”

“You're right.”

Theia's smile truly blossomed. It was as beautiful as any flower, and all the faction members who beheld it swore their loyalty to Theia anew.

Just who is this boy? Just what has he been through to forge him into such a splendid knight?

Meanwhile, they all wondered about the identity of the knight who stood fast by Theia's side.

Bitter Enemies in the Same Boat

Wednesday, November 24th

According to the reports, the trailer carrying the disassembled weapons was passing through the region where Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia currently were. It was on its way to a larger city where Elfaria's faction had a military base, which was believed to be the target of the imperial surprise attack.

"Why don't they just directly bomb it from the air?"

"It's too urban. A bomber attack or a battleship bombardment would mean high civilian casualties if they didn't announce it beforehand."

"And if they did that, the people at the base would have time to prepare... On the other hand, if they attack unannounced, there's no way the public is going to condone it."

"That's right. Moreover, intentionally bombing an urban area knowing there will be civilian casualties is a war crime. It's a violation of the Galactic Treaty's code of conduct."

"So they'd lose all credibility in claiming they were in the right."

"If things were a little further along and the military had a stranglehold on the media, they might bomb a city without any hesitation, but that's not realistic right now."

"I see. So that's why they're using the new mobile weapons."

Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika were currently travelling with the local squad that would be attacking the DKI trailer. Since their route was the same for a good part of the way, they'd decided to move as one unit for additional security until it was time to part ways.

"But that means that you were doing some sketchy stuff in the past."

"Like what?"

“You tried to blow up Corona House with Blue Knight when we just met, remember?”

“You also shot Maki-chan with a laser cannon, Theia-chan!”

“Sh-Shut up! That was just youthful indiscretion!”

The three friends were riding in a transport truck that would take them all the way to the base in the heart of Pardomshiha territory. More specifically, it was a Forthorthian truck. Rather than having tires like the trucks on Earth did, it hovered just above the ground. Thanks to that, there was practically no road noise to stymie the conversation going on within.

“You’d better thank Ruth-san for stopping you.”

“I already have! Now let’s stop talking about when I was stupid!”

“Ahahaha! By the way... how long is it going to take us to reach the others?”

“Hmm? Well, we’ll need to cover twice the distance we did in the forest, but at this rate, it shouldn’t take more than two hours or so.”

The commute to the base was about two hundred kilometers, or, as Theia had said, twice the trek they’d made on foot to get through the forest. If the truck they were aboard moved at full speed the entire time, they would arrive within the hour. However, in order to avoid drawing too much attention to themselves, they were travelling at the same speed any commercial vehicle would. If they kept that up, they’d make it to their destination in about two hours.

“It took us four and a half days to get through the forest and this is only going to take two hours...? Aaaugh, how depressing.”

“That’s just how it is. Empress Alaia’s journey would have been over in an instant with modern transportation.”

“War has changed...”

Planet Alaia was still technically under development, and it was relatively unpopulated because of it. There were vast expanses of desolate wilderness between towns and cities with only a barebones road to connect them. Taking the ride in a truck rather than walking it on foot, however, felt like a luxury. It

only made Yurika appreciate more how miserable the first leg of their journey had been. It really was depressing.

About an hour into their trip, the truck the three friends were riding in pulled over. They'd come to a fork in the road, which was where Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika would be parting ways with the faction squad.

"Return home safely, all of you..."

Theia stepped outside the truck to see the soldiers off. The truth was that she wanted to go with them, but the circumstances held her back. If she could, she would do all the fighting herself. But the truth pained her—no war had ever been won by a single person.

"Say, Koutarou... Did Empress Alaia worry at times like these too?"

Theia wondered how the legendary Silver Princess had overcome her own anxieties. Fortunately, she knew just who to turn to.

"You already know the answer to that, don't you?"

"I want to hear it straight from the horse's mouth since you were actually there."

"In battle... Soldiers die. The people suffer. If Maxfern had wanted to establish a good government, Empress Alaia's cause may have been nothing more than self-righteousness. And, thinking that, she once considered not taking up arms against him."

Koutarou could clearly remember the night of the harvest festival two thousand years ago. Alaia was willing to give up her revenge against Maxfern for the sake of the citizens. To her, Maxfern was clearly an enemy. He'd killed her parents and was trying to take over the country. But even then, Alaia believed that it might be best for the citizens not to incite further fighting.

"But in the end, she decided to fight. She came to realize that the people would never be happy under Maxfern's heartless rule."

Ultimately, Alaia decided to go to war. It was a heartbreaking decision to make for the peace-loving princess, but she knew what had to be done.

Maxfern had no interest in the people or their wellbeing. He had no interest in the betterment of society. If unchecked, he would be the ruin of Forthorthe and all happiness that lived within it. He had to be defeated at all costs, and that was how Alaia eventually came to terms with asking her beloved citizens to go to war. They were fighting the good fight, and in the end, it would bring them the peace they sought.

“And it’s thanks to her that we have Forthorthe today. The long, storied tale of this nation truly began the day Alaia decided it was worth protecting. The day she decided to fight.”

“Yes... You’re right.”

Koutarou was right; Theia had already known that. But hearing it from Koutarou, it lit her resolve anew. Considering the dirty tricks he was pulling now, it was hard to imagine that Vandarion would make a fair and just ruler. He had to be stopped now.

“I wish you all the best of luck in battle, men...”

Even so, Theia was still anxious. Yet she thought that was only right. The day she stopped caring for the wellbeing of her own men would be the day she set foot down the road to tyranny. So from here on out, she would hold those complex emotions dear, believing they would help lead her to a better future.

Koutarou and the girls took a temporary break to allow a scout to check out the road ahead. Since they were now a good distance away from their closest allies, they needed to stay on their guard. They took their time, and even waited a few minutes after the other squad departed to make sure nothing was wrong before setting out again.

Since they were already in Pardomshiha territory, the chances of any sort of ambush were relatively remote. It was also highly unlikely that the enemy even knew Theia was here. Nevertheless, they were taking the utmost precaution and travelling along as swiftly and quietly as they could. The silence, however, was suddenly broken by the soldier driving the truck.

“Your Highness! The scout has detected a flying object approaching at high speeds! It’s coming from 11:30!”

His voice was stiff and tense. As an escort to the sole princess of the Mastir family, he took his job with grave seriousness.

“What kind of object?! An enemy?!”

“I don’t know! There’s no mistaking that it’s a flying object, but the sensors can’t tell what it is! It could just be a big bird, or maybe a small stealth craft... But whatever it is, it’s not normal!”

The scout up ahead had relayed a warning to the driver. The sensors in the small vehicle the scout was driving had detected the flying object, but it was too small and fast to get a detailed read on. The best the scout could tell, the object was bigger than a meter in size, but less than two.

“Koutarou!”

“Based on this feeling... It’s gotta be human! I sense an aura!”

Though they were still some distance away, Koutarou could detect faint human will and emotion coming from the target in question thanks to the psychic powers he’d gotten from Sanae.

“Is it an enemy?!”

“I can’t tell. There’s precaution and haste... but no clear hostility. It might be a scout from their side.”

Though he had a read on their aura, Koutarou couldn’t yet tell if the approaching target was friend or foe. If they’d come with the intent to attack, he should have been able to sense their aggression... but there was nothing of the sort. That being the case, it seemed much more likely the target was a scout or other noncombat unit.

“No... They’re definitely an enemy.”

However, Koutarou’s theory was swiftly shot down by Yurika, who now wore a serious expression that made her look like a completely different person.

“Darkness Rainbow is coming!”

Yurika had an advantage Koutarou didn’t—she could sense mana from the approaching target. And since Koutarou had said it was human, that told Yurika it had to be one of the Darkness Rainbow girls. That meant they were in for a

fight, and Yurika's face said everything. Those resolute eyes and that stern voice... This was the magical girl of love and courage.

"Please stop the truck!"

"What are you going to do?!"

"I'll intercept her! Based on the situation, they already know our position!"

Yurika believed that the enemy had already discovered them. She didn't know if Darkness Rainbow had discovered their location with simple information gathering or divination magic, but surely they were here for a reason. It was hard to imagine that the dark magical girls were just flying all over trying to find bargaining chips for Vandarion.

"Okay, stop the truck!"

"As you wish, my princess!"

"I'm going!"

As soon as the truck stopped, Yurika immediately jumped out. She was so quick to act that it was hard to believe this was really the same clumsy Yurika who frequently fell out of bed.

"Yurika, wait! Don't go alone!"

Koutarou jumped out of the truck right after her and gave chase.

Jeez, Yurika is always like this when it comes to magic!

While Yurika was operating at full capacity as a magical girl, she was currently failing at being part of a team. That drove Koutarou to draw both swords hanging at his waist and go after her. He wasn't going to let her fight alone.

"Blast Fireball! Modifier: High Concentration!"

By the time Koutarou caught up, Yurika was already in the middle of an incantation. She'd chosen an explosive fire spell and compressed it to its limits to make it highly destructive. With its current heat and blast radius, there was no need to score a direct hit. That made it a great option against a target moving at high speeds.

"How does it look?!"

The last to arrive on the scene was Theia, who had been delayed with readying her equipment. She'd swapped out the gear on her Combat Dress with a setup that closely resembled Assault Red.

"We should be able to see her very soon. She'll come up from over that hill just ahead."

Koutarou held his two swords at the ready, Theia steadied a large canon, and Yurika held her incantation. All three of them were ready to intercept their enemy the moment she arrived.

"Here she comes!"

Just as Koutarou raised his voice, someone appeared over the trees about 200 meters in front of them. And just as Yurika had predicted, it was a dark magical girl.

"Rainbow! I finally found you!"

"Crimson-san?!"

It was Dark Crimson, easily identifiable by her carmine outfit and flaming red hair. She was the red magic specialist of Darkness Rainbow, and easily the most powerful of its members.

"Her, huh?! No wonder she went for a frontal charge!"

"Of course the dangerous one had to show up!"

Since Crimson specialized in pure attack power, allowing her to get the first hit in would mean taking serious damage. That's why Koutarou and the others decided to attack right away. They were hoping to defeat her before she could get a single incantation off. However, Crimson took them all by surprise.

"Wait, hold your fire! I have no intention of fighting you! I came to tell you something!"

Indeed, the dark magical girl who claimed to be a fighter above all else was claiming she'd come in peace. To prove it, she even threw down her staff. She then defenselessly approached with her hands in the air.

"What do you think, Yurika?"

“It doesn’t look like she’s trying to use any spells or magic items...”

“She still isn’t registering any hostility, either. I don’t know what her real intentions are, but she’s at least serious about not fighting us.”

Once Koutarou confirmed that Crimson’s aura didn’t betray any aggression, he returned his two swords to their sheaths. Theia followed his lead and lowered her cannon. Yurika continued to hold up her staff with an incantation at the ready, but eventually realized Crimson meant them no harm and dismissed her spell.

“You sure are untrusting, Rainbow!”

“I just can’t imagine why you’d be here if it’s not for a fight.”

“I’m flattered!”

With a wry smile, Crimson landed in front of Koutarou and the girls. It was painfully clear she was sincere at this point. She still had her hands in the air and her staff was lying dozens of meters behind her.

“But that’s just how important this is!”

Crimson began her explanation as soon as she touched down. It seemed time was of the essence. It was rare to see a carefree spirit like Crimson in a hurry.

“Your allies are about to fall into a terrible trap! You should call them back right now!”

“What?!”

Koutarou’s eyes shot open wide in surprise. Those words were completely unexpected from an enemy, especially one who so loved any excuse for a fight.

“What do you mean?!” Yurika shouted in a stern voice.

Like Koutarou, she was skeptical of Crimson’s warning.

“The Imperial Army isn’t carrying mobile weapons, but a virus! Vandarion is *hoping* your allies will blow it up!”

That was the real reason Crimson was here. She’d been searching all over for Koutarou and company not to fight them, but to warn them of Vandarion’s plan.

“They leaked false information to try and get you to attack! And if you do, you’ll spread the virus and kill every human on this planet!”

Vandarion’s plan was very systematic. When Alaia was first developed, it was home to multiple anti-government resistance forces. They had bases set up all over the planet. Though they’d fallen out of use over the years as development on Alaia continued, they were still discovered from time to time as were weapons that had been left behind. The Imperial Army had just so happened to discover a bioweapon in one of them, and that set Vandarion’s gears turning. Or, at least, that was the story.

In reality, the virus was something Vandarion had come up with himself. He then turned it over to local troops and ordered them to dispose of it at an appropriate facility—like an abandoned rebel base. It would be a top secret operation, so the crew transporting it would be taking an undisclosed path at an undisclosed time. Capitalizing on that secrecy, Vandarion had then spread the rumor that new mobile weapons from DKI would be transported along said route at the same time the bioweapon convoy would be moving. He even imported new mobile weapons to Alaia to give the rumors credibility. Thanks to multiple levels of subterfuge, it was a difficult trap to see through.



Getting ambushed by mobile weapons was a blow Vandarion knew Elfaria's faction would want to avoid, and the disassembled weapons in a single trailer made for an easy target. But if they continued with their preemptive strike, Elfaria's faction would blow the virus sky high, unwittingly spreading it to neighboring regions and beyond. It would be an epidemic of deadly proportions.

"And you know what Vandarion's going to do! He'll twist the truth so the public thinks you did it on purpose! He's got press onsite to make sure that happens! His goal is to make Elfaria's faction look bad!"

Vandarion had set this all up so that the media would catch a glimpse of it and he could feed the public just enough misinformation to make it look like Elfaria really had spread the virus on purpose. His goal was to paint them as ruthless terrorists rather than a righteous cause. And all it would take was one serious tragedy with a high body count... Then it would be all over for Elfaria. Who would want a murderer for an empress, after all?

Vandarion's plan was contingent on Elfaria's faction making a move. He was constantly trying to plot one step ahead of her, and this sinister strategy would eliminate a lot of her future options by pulling the rug of public support out from under her. But since he had nothing to lose even if she didn't take the bait, there was no reason not to set the trap and see if she'd fall for it.

"...I understand what you're saying, but we can't just accept it at face value."

Yurika felt like everything Crimson was saying made sense. She couldn't deny the possibility that it was true. But even then, she couldn't bring herself to believe it without any proof. After all, Crimson was still an enemy too.

"We know that! That's why I came myself!"

Crimson understood Yurika's wariness. If their positions were reversed, she would undoubtedly feel the same way. So in order to convince her, she made an earnest plea.

"Put yourself in my shoes! If I lost all my enemies to fight, what would I do?!"

Darkness Rainbow had sent Crimson because they believed she would be the most convincing under the circumstances. She lived for a good fight. Combat

was everything to her and strength was the only thing she treasured. She was strangely straightforward in that sense, and just about the last person in the universe who would try and take out her enemies with some kind of scheme.

She really means that... She's not lying...

While he wasn't on Sanae's level, Koutarou could use his psychic powers to read people's emotions. And right now, Crimson's aura told him she wasn't lying. She hadn't cast a single spell since landing either, so she couldn't be tricking him that way. But even without such reassurances, Koutarou genuinely believed that she was telling the truth.

"I believe you... But tell me one thing: why is Elexis trying to stop Vandarion's plot?"

Though Koutarou trusted Crimson, that question still gave him great pause. He couldn't understand what Elexis was doing, and he was ultimately the one that had sent Crimson here. That didn't add up, however, since Elexis was supposed to be on Vandarion's side now.

"Neither Elexis nor any of us would call ourselves good people! But there are still lines not even we would cross!"

The same as Crimson didn't want to lose opponents worth fighting, Elexis had his own reasons for not wanting to cause a massive tragedy.

Elexis wanted to overthrow Elfaria because, according to him, she wasn't an ideal leader. Elexis's real ambition was the betterment of Forthorthian society, and he'd already worked hard to that end. Allying with Vandarion was also a means to that end in his book, not the actual goal itself. Once he'd gotten what he needed to out of Vandarion, he intended to overthrow him too and revolutionize Forthorthe.

And because Elexis believed in Forthorthe's future, he had absolutely no interest in unnecessary civilian casualties. The people of Forthorthe were ultimately part of his goal, and he first and foremost thought like a businessman. It would be foolish to kill off potential customers.

Elexis believed that changing the world would take sacrifice, and he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice people if it were truly necessary. But nothing about

Vandarion's plan was necessary. While it would be effective, it was far too short-sighted and the cost was far too high. Elexis detested such reckless uses of power. He could forgive it if it served a greater purpose, but this was strictly malicious.

"Now that you mention it, he is oddly self-righteous..."

Hearing what Crimson said, Koutarou was reminded of his last fight with Elexis. He'd done what he could to reduce needless bloodshed in battle, and even kept his promise to replace Koutarou's ruined clothes. So while Koutarou believed Elexis was evil, he was at least bound by some moral code of his own design. And thinking about it that way, it made perfect sense that Elexis might go behind Vandarion's back to warn Koutarou and the others of something so sinister.

"Besides, if Vandarion is victorious this early, that would be troublesome for us too. Because Elexis still hasn't fully installed himself in a seat of power yet, our plan to return home as his glorious allies would be ruined."

Elexis was only working with Vandarion to increase his own influence. But if Vandarion managed to take a decisive victory now without Elexis's help, his political maneuvering would all be for naught. And if Elexis wasn't able to claw his way to the top, there wouldn't be much he could do to help bring the Folsarians home to Forthorthe. In short, Elexis and Darkness Rainbow were on the verge of losing everything they'd worked so hard for. That was why they'd come to Koutarou and company for help.

"What do you think, Koutarou?"

"...Let's take her word for it."

"Are you sure?"

"I think we can stand to have a little faith in that resolute side she's shown us from time to time."

Ultimately, Koutarou decided to believe Crimson. Considering their previous histories, the chances of this being a trap on Elexis and Darkness Rainbow's part was low. Alternatively, the risk of ignoring their warning was too high. In the end, they could afford to believe her, but they couldn't afford not to. That was

Koutarou's conclusion on the matter.

"If you believe in her, I will too."

"I'm not satisfied, but I'll also follow your lead."

Theia and Yurika were behind Koutarou. Even if his decision was emotionally hard to accept, it was logically sound.

"That helps! Without your cooperation, we would have had no way of stopping Elfaria's faction!"

Crimson seemed relieved upon hearing Koutarou and the others would work with her. She'd known she wouldn't be able to stop the faction squad on her own. They'd never listen to her. No, if anyone could convince them to back down, it would have to be someone in a position of authority they trusted. In other words, it would have to be Koutarou or Theia.

In order to stop what appeared to be a surprise attack by the Imperial Army, Elfaria's faction was launching a surprise attack of their own. In order to stay stealthy, they were operating under complete radio silence. Because of that, there was a chance that a call from Koutarou and the others might not even reach them. Theia could undoubtedly get through to them with a royal broadcast, but they couldn't risk using a signal like that. It would likely give away her location to the enemy.

That meant the safest option to get in touch with the faction squad was physically going after them. But with no time to spare, Koutarou, Theia, and Yurika couldn't stick with the truck they'd been travelling in so far. It would be much faster just to fly. Koutarou had his armor, Theia had her Combat Dress, and Yurika had her staff-cum-broomstick. And since trying to hide their location from Darkness Rainbow was no longer an issue, Yurika could use her magic freely to speed and warp them along as needed. Thanks to that, it seemed they would make it in time.

"If for some reason it's too late by the time we get there... It'll be a huge gamble, but I'm thinking of broadcasting a ceasefire over the entire region."

"If it comes to that, I'll protect you. Don't worry."

“That’s my line. Don’t harsh my style.”

“As you wish, my princess.”

Theia and Koutarou were joking around as usual, but contrary to their lighthearted banter, they both looked quite stern. It seemed they were just going through the motions to keep each other calm.

“What’s their relationship again? They sure don’t look like just master and servant.”

Crimson watched the princess and her knight with a puzzled expression. She had a vague idea of the social structure of Forthorthe, but nothing about Theia and Koutarou struck her as being determined by class. Curious, Crimson decided to ask Yurika about it.

“They started off on bad terms... A lot of stuff happened though and they started to get along. And eventually Satomi-san became her vassal.”

Knowing that Crimson was still an enemy, Yurika carefully chose her words as she explained Koutarou and Theia’s relationship to her.

“So they’re still dragging along some of that baggage from when they were adversaries?”

“I think so.”

“...Is Maki like that too?”

“Ah...”

That was where Yurika realized what Crimson was really after.

Crimson-san is worried about Maki-chan...

Crimson was interested in Koutarou’s relationship with Theia because she was wondering if it reflected his relationship with Maki. Had she truly been released from the shackles of Darkness Rainbow, or were they still holding her down? Even though Crimson was now technically Maki’s enemy, she still cared for her.

“Um, Maki-chan’s fine. There’s no one among us that would hold her past against her. I mean, we were practically all enemies to start with.”

“I see...”

Crimson flashed a small, charming smile. It was enough to make Yurika momentarily forget she was dealing with an evil magical girl.

“But I’m sure it still bothers Maki.”

“Yeah. Maki-chan sometimes seems to worry that no one else is worried about it.”

“How silly.”

“Maki-chan’s just that serious.”

“If only that man would forcibly make Maki his woman, everything would be much simpler.”

“That wouldn’t be a real solution.”

“If you can say that, then for now and for now alone, I’ll accept that Maki’s found a real group of friends to be with.”

“Crimson-san, you...”

It was extremely rare for Dark Crimson, the powerhouse of Darkness Rainbow, to smile warmly like a normal teenage girl. Seeing it the first time for herself, Yurika could tell just how much Maki meant to Crimson. Yet at the same time, it made her a little sad that Crimson had chosen battle over her only friend.

“We’re almost there.”

As Yurika was looking at her, Crimson’s expression suddenly returned to normal.

“Huh?”

“Look. The cavalry’s here.”

Crimson pointed behind them. When the surprised Yurika turned to see what she meant, she spotted five girls in colorful outfits and a slightly older man in a suit flying towards them at high speeds. She knew exactly who it was.

“Satomi-san! It’s Darkness Rainbow!”

“I know. But I don’t sense any hostility.”

“The way they’re flying doesn’t make it look like they’re preparing to attack, either. At least for now.”

Because of their history together, Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia instinctively went on the defensive.

“You don’t have to worry. They’re here to help,” reassured Crimson.

“Logically, I know that. But...”

Koutarou knew Crimson was telling the truth, but he still had to be prepared. If there was even the slightest chance this could turn out to be a trap, Theia’s life was in danger.

“We have no intention of fighting you right now, Koutarou-kun!”

Once he was close enough to sense the tense atmosphere around Koutarou and the others, Elexis put his hands in the air. The powersuit he was wearing came equipped with a variety of weapons, but none of them were locked and loaded. Elexis was doing the best he could to prove he meant no harm.

“He’s right. Without you, we won’t stand a chance of convincing Elfaria’s faction to call off their attack.”

Beside Elexis was Maya, who was practically rolling her eyes. It was quite clear she was dissatisfied with the current situation. If there had been any alternative whatsoever, she never would have agreed to team up with Koutarou and company.

“I know! That’s part of what’s so hard to believe!”

Koutarou finally removed his hands from his swords. Theia and Yurika followed his lead and lowered their weapons. They were still on guard, but they knew now wasn’t the time to be fighting.

“What a strange development...” Koutarou mumbled between sighs.

“I feel the same way. I didn’t expect Vandarion to go this far,” Elexis agreed with a nod.

He and his companions were rather stumped by this turn of events as well. His goal was to work with the army to end imperial rule in Forthorthe and use the influence he gathered in the process to establish a new political system and

realize his ideal world. But if Vandarion forged ahead as things were, he would have an iron grip on the reigns of the nation and never let Elexis have his chance in the spotlight. Forthorthe would go from being an empire to a dictatorship, and that certainly wasn't what Elexis wanted either.

"Isn't this your fault for poking Max— I mean, Vandarion?"

"Poking? What do you mean?"

"You know, poking the bear. By artfully weaseling your way into things, you put some real pressure on him."

"I see... You mean to say he feels threatened and is trying to bring a swift end to things. Well, that's certainly within the realm of possibility."

Elexis saw the truth in Koutarou's words and nodded safely. Maya felt the same way, but her reaction was the opposite.

"El, you're too exacting. You should be at least a little bit more adult."

"Yes, yes, I'll be more mindful. You do mean in setting the mood, no?"

"My god, men are just..."

Maya and Elexis' back and forth was almost like Koutarou's with the girls. If it was an act, it was an impressive one. At least for now, Koutarou was starting to trust them.

"But Koutarou-kun, when it comes to putting pressure on Vandarion, you and I are equally to blame."

"That might be true..."

Koutarou couldn't argue. He and the other girls had rather one-sidedly dispatched the soldiers that had been sent to attack them. Of course they'd be perceived as a threat after a stunt like that. Between them and Elexis, Vandarion was feeling pressured from both sides. That was why he was lashing out.

"But now you understand, don't you, Koutarou-kun?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Why I believe Empress Elfaria's rule is insufficient."

Elfaria couldn't prevent the military from becoming arrogant. In fact, when she tried to reign them in, they'd only grown nastier. And now as a result, they were about to take out the entire population of Alaia with a bioweapon. The royal families of Forthorthe had protected the country for millennia, but Elexis believed it was time for their reign to come to an end. In order to make things right, the entire government would have to be rebuilt from the ground up

"I do understand, Elexis... But I don't agree."

Koutarou could see where Elexis was coming from. He might even have some valid points, but that didn't mean his answer was the only one. Elexis saw the two-thousand-year tenure of the royal families as a sign it had long outlived its usefulness, whereas Koutarou saw it as a sign that it was meant to last. He thought there was no way it would have been around for this long if it wasn't working. He saw the merits of reform, but abolishing imperial rule altogether was taking it too far.

"That's enough for now, Koutarou-kun."

Changing someone's opinion was hard. The first step was getting them to listen. As a businessman, Elexis understood that quite well. But the process took time, and that was the one thing he was short on right now.

"Hey, young master, sorry for interrupting your conversation... but shouldn't we, like, start preparing or something?"

That was when Dark Orange flew up between Koutarou and Elexis. Like Elexis, she was worried about the time. But in typical Dark Orange fashion, her over-the-top cuteness made it hard to tell.

"You're quite right. Let's go."

"They call you 'young master'?"

"She insisted and refuses to relent no matter how many times I ask."

"Though I hate to admit it, I have a similar problem..."

"Hahaha."

Elexis let out a bold laugh as he signaled to Darkness Rainbow with his hand. They readied their staves, but not to attack. They were casting spells on

themselves.

“What are you planning on doing?” Koutarou asked.

“It would be rather problematic if our identities were exposed during this operation, so we’ll be going in disguised.”

There, Elexis donned the helmet to his powersuit, which worked in a similar fashion to Koutarou’s armor. Putting the helmet on activated its combat mode and sent power to all its battle systems and related gear.

“You’re disguising yourselves?”

“Yes. Today, we are...”

Before Elexis could finish his sentence, a white cloud of smoke encircled Darkness Rainbow.

“Proud members of the Satomi band of knights!”

By the time the smoke cleared, Darkness Rainbow looked completely different. They’d taken the appearance of Kiriha and the other girls who weren’t around. They’d also transformed Elexis’s powersuit to look like standard imperial armor. This was their way of saying they wouldn’t be acting as Darkness Rainbow and the CEO of DKI today. No, they were here as members of Elfaria’s faction.

Koutarou, Yurika, and Theia—plus the eight fake Satomi knights—managed to catch up to the faction squad just before the scheduled strike. They were hiding in the woods waiting for the trailer in question to pass by, so they weren’t easy to spot. But a cleverly camouflaged communications antenna was standing right where they’d agreed to stake out the road, so there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that it was the squad.

“Phew... Looks like we made it. My forecasts kept showing me the trailer getting attacked, so I was starting to get nervous.”

Green, disguised as Clan, let out a sigh of relief when they spotted the antenna. With her divination magic, she’d already seen several ways this could go down. Not all of them were good, which had put her a bit more on edge than

most of her companions.

“Princess, shouldn’t you make contact?”

“I was just thinking of doing that.”

Urged on by Dark Orange disguised as Sanae, Theia used a comms device in her Combat Dress to radio the faction strike force. After their fight in Folsaria, Orange and Theia were on bad terms. Having a common goal, however, eased the hostility between them. They both knew this wasn’t the time for personal business.

“This is Princess Theiamillis! Do you read me?”

“Your Highness?! What are you doing here?!”

The startled voice of the strike force commander came over the line in response to Theia’s call. She was using a laser communicator, which worked like a landline telephone with light instead of an actual cable line. It was a relatively simple form of communication that required direct contact between the communicating parties, so it wasn’t good for long distances and it didn’t work outside of line of sight. It also wasn’t capable of sending video or any other visual data. To the credit of its direct nature, however, there was very little risk of it being intercepted or jammed. As long as Theia could see the squad’s antenna, she would be able to communicate with them safely.



“Don’t worry about me! More importantly, call off your attack this instant! Vandarion set us up! The trailer isn’t carrying mobile weapons—it’s carrying a bioweapon!”

“What?!”

Theia was quick and concise with her orders, telling the commander just what he needed to know to get a grasp of the situation. Thankfully, he was well suited to his post and quick on the uptake.

“Listen up, men! Change of plans! Hold your fire! Don’t shoot! I repeat: *do not shoot* no matter what! That’s an order!”

Not even putting Theia on hold, the commander quickly gave out orders to his subordinates. Though disrespectful, Theia approved of his decision circumstances considered.

“Did we make it...?”

“Rest easy, Your Highness. We’re still five minutes before the scheduled strike, so there’s no need to worry.”

“That’s good... Very good...”

Theia let out a big sigh, exhaling the tension that had been building up inside. Knowing the population of an entire planet was at stake had put a great burden on her, and the relief upon feeling that burden lifted was immense. However, they weren’t out of the woods just yet. The faction squad still needed to retreat without letting the Imperial Army spot them. Having recollected herself, Theia called out to the commander again.

“With that out of the way, we’ll head over there—”

Theia was planning on covering the squad while they retreated, but in the middle of explaining her plan, Green suddenly raised her voice.

“Wait a moment! Something’s not right!”

Yellow—disguised as Harumi—let out a surprised squeal at the unexpected outburst.

“Eek! Er... What is it?”

“The future where the trailer is attacked hasn’t disappeared from the forecast!”

Green’s divination magic allowed her to see all possible futures. The more likely a certain future was, the more clearly it appeared in her mind. Conversely, unlikely futures appeared hazy and thin. And when a future was no longer a possibility at all, it would disappear from her sight altogether. That’s what should have happened the moment Theia gave the order to call off the strike, yet Green could still see the trailer exploding with alarming clarity.

“Perhaps the trailer driver gets in an accident. Or perhaps they end up charging Elfaria’s faction and forcing their hand. Something along those lines.”

Blue, disguised as Ruth, offered a theory as to why. Blue rarely spoke up, but when she did, it was only after she’d given it thorough thought. Her surmises seemed to be quite plausible given the situation, but Green shook her head.

“Even after the princess gave the order to call off the strike, the probability hardly dropped at all! That can’t be it! There has to be something else going on!”

If the trailer exploded because of an accident, Green should be able to see evidence of the accident. Moreover, it would be such an unlikely event that the future containing it should be quite hazy. The fact that the explosion still appeared so clearly in her forecast told her that it was no accident.

If the explosion’s not an accident, then that means this is all by design. But since the princess herself has called off the strike, that means Elfaria’s faction isn’t responsible. In other words... Ah, of course!

It was Purple who stumbled across the answer first. Just like Kiriha, who she was currently disguised as, she was quick-witted and calm.

“They’re doing exactly what we’re doing! Vandarion has troops disguised as Elfaria supporters lying in wait to take out the trailer!”

Vandarion wanted a failsafe for his plan. The troops transporting the virus would take the utmost care in handling it. They kept it in a sturdy trailer, and the specially-made container for the virus was rather sturdy itself. There was a chance, however slight, that it might not spread as intended even if it did get

blown up. And there were too many other variables. What if the trailer broke down? What if Elfaria's people didn't use a strong enough explosive and only managed to blow up the trailer and not the bioweapon inside? In order to eliminate such uncertainties, Vandarion had soldiers disguise themselves as Elfaria supporters and had them lie in wait to make sure all went according to plan.

"I see! Green, where are Vandarion's men?!"

In the heat of the moment, Theia was quick on her feet. She instantly increased the output on her Combat Dress when she realized the situation.

"They're probably by the woods over there... Ten o'clock from the communications antenna!"

"Let's go, Koutarou, Yurika!"

"Right behind you!"

"C-Coming!"

"And just in case, set your gear for space use! We're dealing with a virus here!"

Their only lead was Green's future forecast. It was vague, but it was all they had to go on. They'd have to trust her. If Vandarion really had men waiting to blow up the trailer even if the faction squad didn't, it would be a catastrophe. Koutarou and the others were praying Green's forecast was wrong, but at the same time, they were hoping she knew exactly what she was talking about. The most frightening scenario would be if Vandarion really did have men nearby, but Green couldn't locate them. With those complex emotions swirling in their hearts, Koutarou and the others flew through the sky at full speed in the direction Green had pointed them.

"El, we should go too!"

"I agree! In situations like this, the more hands and eyes, the better!"

Elaxis, Maya, and the six leaders of Darkness Rainbow chased after Koutarou and the others. They had their own reasons for wanting to stop Vandarion's recklessness.

Elfaria's faction had come up with a detailed strategy for the preemptive strike on the trailer. Soldiers were spread out in groups across advantageous terrain, and according to the topographical map, there shouldn't be any where Green was leading them. That meant if they found any of Elfaria's troops there, they were really Vandarion's imposters and subject to immediate elimination.

"Theia, I found them!"

"Are you certain?!"

"Probably! I'll send you the data right now!"

Koutarou could sense human auras up ahead with his psychic powers. Since humans were highly intelligent creatures, their auras were distinctly different from that of other animals. Needless to say, they stood out in the woods. Koutarou used his armor's sensors to get a rough scan of the area, and sent the data to Theia's Combat Dress.

"So these are the coordinates? Hmm... You're right! I got a hit too! There's no mistaking it!"

Based on the data Koutarou forwarded her, Theia used the sensors on her Combat Dress to scan the area too. As Theia's Combat Dress was designed for combat use, it had more advanced sensors that yielded more data than the ones in Koutarou's armor. And with it, she could clearly detect a small group of people up ahead.

"Satomi-san! The trailer is coming!"

Just as Koutarou and the others discovered Vandarion's ambush, a large trailer came over the hill down the road. It was still a good distance away, but it meant the clock was really ticking now. It would be in range soon enough, and they'd have to do something to stop Vandarion's men before then.

"Theia, have the faction troops stop the trailer! I'll take care of the ambush!"

Koutarou made a swift call and left contacting the strike force to Theia while he forged onward.

"I'm counting on you! I'll catch up as soon as I can!"

Theia would be delayed relaying the new plan back to the squad commander. She was concerned about Koutarou charging ahead already, but he wasn't alone. It looked like he had his own squad right behind him.

"We'll back you up, Koutarou-kun!"

"Listen up, ladies! Remember not to go all out and expose yourselves! I'm talking to you, Crimson!"

"I get it, Maya!"

Elexis, Maya, and the six leaders of Darkness Rainbow were the ones following after Koutarou. With the eight of them at his side, Theia had nothing to worry about. She knew firsthand just how strong they were.

"Satomi-san, Theia-chan, I'm going to head for the trailer. We wouldn't want something unexpected to happen."

The strike force would be en route to the trailer any second now, but this was an elaborate trap of Vandarion's design. There was no telling what might happen. Though they didn't like sending her off on her own, Theia and Koutarou agreed that the flexible and versatile Yurika was the best equipped to handle such an uncertain situation.

"We're counting on you!"

"Right!"

Yurika turned and darted off, cutting a low arc through the sky. After seeing her off, Koutarou put his hands on the two swords hanging at his waist. That was just about when Elexis caught up to him.

"I'll be your backup, Koutarou-kun."

Elexis had a cheerful smile as he readied the rifle he was carrying. He was planning on supporting Koutarou at range.

"I guess I owe you my thanks."

"I might not look it, but I'm a decent shot. You can count on me."

"I am this time, Elexis."

"You won't regret it... this time."

Once they were both ready, they moved forward and quickly caught a glimpse of what appeared to be faction soldiers in the woods. They were of course imposters. Vandarion's men who had either stolen or were imitating the crests and insignias of the local branch.

"I know exactly how you fight, so feel free to be as wild as you always are!"

"You leave the wild part to me! Just don't be too precise—that's a bad habit of yours!"

Koutarou was fighting the fake allies in front of him with the fake allies at his side. It was a strange battle where nothing was quite as it seemed. There was only one thing that comforted Koutarou, and that was knowing Elexis and Darkness Rainbow were on his side for once. He knew it would only be temporary, but he was honestly grateful for it right now.

There was little to no difference between the Imperial Army and Elfaria's faction in terms of their looks. They were all imperial soldiers originally, so they used the same uniforms and equipment. The only way to tell them apart was by the crests and insignias identifying each unit. Thanks to that, it was relatively easy to pretend to be someone else. All one had to do was switch out their crests and insignias. So while Vandarion's men below certainly looked like faction troops, there was one dead giveaway—the mobile weapons protecting them.

"They have mobile weapons! Elexis, do you know anything about them?!"

Approaching from the air when the troops had tree cover to shield them would just make Koutarou an easy target, so he decided to land and charge at the imperial unit consisting of several dozen soldiers on foot. When he got closer, however, he spotted the mobile weapons defensively positioned around the troops. It was Koutarou's first time seeing ones like this, so he turned to Elexis for any advice or knowledge he might have.

"Of course I do. DKI made those, you know."

Elexis sniped the Imperial Army's communications antenna as he casually answered Koutarou. Both came as a surprise.

"You made them?!"

“Who else? That’s a model we debuted last month.”

Koutarou should have seen it coming. Right on the side of the mobile weapons was the DKI logo. They were Dragon Knight Industries’ latest product.

“Do they have some kind of weak point?!”

Koutarou was confident that he could win against normal mobile weapons, but hearing these were from DKI made him nervous. Elexis’s mobile weapons had put him through hell before.

“None whatsoever. They were made using combat data we collected while fighting you, after all. The components are largely the same, but they’ll be a new beast to fight.”

The new DKI mobile weapons weren’t all that different compared to the design of the previous model the Imperial Army had been using. They were still something between a fighter and a tank. But while they looked largely the same outwardly, they were very different on the inside.

Elexis had crafted the AI and combat systems for this model with data he’d collected fighting against Koutarou and his allies. Though they weren’t equipped with any magical enhancements or spiritual energy upgrades, their performance had been significantly enhanced. They were a cut above the last mobile weapons Koutarou had fought.

“They’re not as strong as the combined force of Warlord II and the Motor Knights, but you’ll end up eating dirt if you treat them like your average mobile weapon.”

“You make it sound easy...”

“Oh, I forgot! They do have one weakness, Koutarou-kun!”

“What?! Tell me—*now*!”

“The running cost of lone units is abysmal. It’s much more effective to deploy them in groups like this.”

“That’s not a weakness!”

When the communications antenna was destroyed, one of the mobile weapons picked up on Koutarou and the others approaching. And one was all it

took. Without missing a beat, it and all the others began moving simultaneously. There were only eight in total, but since they attacked in unison, they made for a fearsome foe. Worse yet, they had data on Koutarou specifically. He knew they'd immediately go on the offensive.

“Detecting high energy signatures! Coordinated laser cannon attack incoming!”

The AI in Koutarou's armor began blaring a warning. The instant the mobile weapons saw Koutarou, they recognized him as a threat and began preparing a synchronous attack. In order to take out the fast-moving Koutarou in a single strike, they'd need simultaneous hits with their fastest weapon—their laser cannons. It was an attack Elexis had perfected with Warlord II and his Motor Knights.

“You're always making such troublesome stuff!”

“Ahaha! Quite the masterpiece if I say so myself!”

“Shut up! It's not funny right now!”

“I know, I know. Orange, Green, if you will...”

“Leave it to me, young master!”

“I can't believe you don't have an emergency override...”

At Elexis's behest, Orange and Green began their incantations.

“Twinkling Starburst!”

The spell that Orange cast created a glittering cloud that changed the density of the air and diffused light within it. It was a flashy spell that Orange loved to use, but it was quite effective at weakening lasers.

“Perfect Illusion! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

Still grumping, Green activated an illusion spell that covered a wide area. Her specialty school of green magic included illusions, and with her prowess, she could create illusions powerful enough to fool even machines. And that's what she used now to make it look like Koutarou and everyone else had suddenly shifted to the side.

“Alert: Laser cannon attack commencing!”

Not a second after Koutarou’s armor warned him of the incoming attack, the eight mobile weapons fired their lasers together. The combined beams hit their target—Koutarou—at the speed of light. The mobile weapons had identified him as the greatest threat, so they were intent on taking him out first.

“The distortion field has been hit. Energy loss moderate.”

Fortunately, Koutarou himself didn’t take any damage. Orange’s spell had greatly reduced the potency of the lasers, and Green’s spell had messed with their aim. All eight shots at full power would’ve taken Koutarou out instantly, but all he took was one glancing, weakened blow.

“That was close...”

Still, Koutarou was none too pleased to find out he was up against enemies that could take him out instantly, so he increased his speed even more. He needed to close the distance as quickly as possible and cut off their synchronous attacks.

“I’m coming with you, Koutarou!”

Crimson followed after him, smiling with Shizuka’s face. Since their ways of fighting and auras were somewhat similar, Koutarou didn’t find it the slightest bit uncanny. In fact, it was something of a nice reminder he had other companions waiting for him, even if they were far away.

“Let’s go, Crimson!”

“I’m only protecting you because Maki’s a friend!”

It wouldn’t be until much later that Koutarou realized that, in the moment, Crimson had called Maki “a friend.” He wasn’t quite sure if she meant his or hers—or perhaps maybe even both. He was sorry he hadn’t thought to ask her to clarify.

As Koutarou and “the Satomi knights” began their skirmish with Vandarion’s soldiers, Yurika was closing in on the trailer. It would be up to her and the faction squad to keep it from proceeding any further.

“I had no idea it was this big...”

Yurika was somewhat puzzled upon seeing the trailer. It was far larger than she'd first imagined when she heard the word “trailer.” That was by and large because of her bias as an Earthling. The military trailer she was looking at was perhaps more accurately described as a moving cargo container. It almost looked like a train car as its tireless frame glided down the road like rails. Compared to the standard Earth trailer Yurika had been thinking of, this was easily three times as long and wide.

Thinking about it rationally, however, those dimensions made perfect sense. Even disassembled, it supposedly carrying large mobile weapons. The trailer would have to be *at least* big enough to hold them. Moreover, large cargo trailers like this were common all over Alaia. The planet was still technically under development, so they were useful for all kinds of things.

“Stopping it won't be easy. And if we use too much firepower, we might trigger the virus weapon...”

As large as the trailer was, weaker attacks wouldn't do much to slow it down. But using too much force could potentially release the virus weapon within even without an explosion. That's why, before she attacked, there was something she had to do.

I remember Satomi-san said that nothing good will come from putting off what must be done!

Yurika quickly decided on a plan of action and used her bracelet to contact the squad commander.

“How may I be of assistance, Yurika-dono?”

Yurika was considered part of the Satomi band of knights under Theia's direct command. Because of that, the commander addressed her as formally as he would any knight.

“I'm going to inspect the trailer to determine exactly where the virus weapon is! So for now, please refrain from using any serious attacks!”

Presently, they didn't know where the virus weapon was being kept—or even how many of them there were. Before attacking to stop the trailer, Yurika

would need to get inside to confirm those details.

“Allow me to send you backup! It’s dangerous to go alone!”

“Thank you! We have to stop this no matter what!”

Under ordinary circumstances, Yurika would have refused the help. Fighting alone put risk on the fewest number of people possible, after all. But this was different. If they didn’t find the virus weapon, everyone would be at risk. Yurika deciding not to search for it alone was the smart call.

“All right, I’m going! Once I’m on board, I’ll secure the area. After I do, please follow in behind me.”

“Roger that! Best of luck to you!”

“Thank you!”

After a short briefing, Yurika took the lead and flew off towards the trailer on her broom. The soldiers saw her off, and a conversation quickly struck up about her.

“That’s an awfully cute knight... And boy is she brave.”

“And humble to boot. She was polite and even thanked us at the end.”

“That’s what you’d expect from Princess Theiamillis’s personal band of knights, I guess?”

“Hey, we’re Princess Theiamillis and Empress Elfaria’s personal military! We can’t get shown up here!”

Yurika looked especially small as she flew off into the distance, but she was shining with seven colors of love and courage. Guided by the light of her radiant rainbow, the soldiers boldly advanced.

Since they were pretending to be a part of the Satomi knights, Elexis and Darkness Rainbow had to fight by their rules. In short, they were to keep casualties to a bare minimum—that was the policy the royal families had upheld since Alaia’s time, and it was a policy that the Satomi knights honored. While Koutarou initially worried that was something the evil CEO of a mega-corporation and seven evil magical girls might struggle with, his worry turned

out to be unfounded.

“Why don’t you guys work for Rainbow Heart again?!”

Koutarou was honestly shocked to see how artfully Crimson incapacitated the Imperial Army soldiers without killing them. In response, she grinned wide while punching out her next target.

“Just mowing down the enemy isn’t enough if you wanna overthrow a government or two. Have you ever heard of an evil organization that *only* kills?”

Darkness Rainbow primarily used their magical talents to pull strings from the shadows. Really, it was something of a rarity that they came right out and used force. That said, Crimson was insanely strong and bad at holding back. Her allies put a good deal of time and energy into making weapons that would specifically keep her from killing her enemies, and she was using one such weapon right now. It was a gauntlet designed to knock out anyone she punched with it.

“You’re suggesting that while you guys are the bad guys per se, Yurika and Rainbow Heart are actually the more violent ones, aren’t you?”

“Well, keeping us under control is their job, so that’s only natural. Irony, isn’t it?”

“If you guys would just knock it off, Yurika and the rest of Rainbow Heart wouldn’t have to use violence either.”

“Sadly, I want the opposite! Like this!”

After taking down the soldiers in front of her, Crimson clenched her staff in both hands and launched a brightly burning fireball. Her target was the group of mobile weapons bombarding them from the rear. And while she’d agreed to keep bloodshed to a minimum, she was allowed to go all out against the machines.

“Well, whatever your reasons, you’re a big help right now!”

“That’s ironic too!”

There, Koutarou took off as if chasing after Crimson’s fireball. In his case, GoL was blocking the infantryman from getting closer to him, so he was free to focus on the mobile weapons. He went in swinging, attacking one whose barrier

was about to collapse after getting nailed with Crimson's fireball.

"What?!"

However, Signaltin was suddenly blocked by a glowing, cylindrical light the mobile weapon held up to shield itself. Completely caught off guard, Koutarou took a second too long to notice the mobile weapon charging its close-range beam canon.

"Guh!"

Koutarou twisted his body back on reflex. Thanks to Sanae's spiritual circuitry, Koutarou's reflexes were supernaturally fast and he was narrowly able to avoid a direct hit. But even a grazing shot from a beam cannon at point blank was enough to drain GoL's barrier of most of its energy. The mobile weapon then didn't waste any time thrusting the strange glowing light out at Koutarou, who was now wary of incoming attacks and dodged it readily.

"That was close! Elexis, what is this thing?!"

"It was specifically designed to block that sword of yours. It's a distortion field made thin and narrow to make it more concentrated. You could think of it as a cutting-edge parrying dagger, good for both offense and defense."

Energy became stronger the more concentrated it was. So by making a very small barrier, Elexis had come up with a clever way to block Signaltin, although he didn't know its name. That was the idea behind the glowing rod the mobile weapon was using.

It was a weapon that would be impossible for a normal human to wield. The glowing rod, or dagger as Elexis had called it, had an extremely short reach, making it hard to block anything with. Moreover, because of its small size and lightweight, it would be hard to get enough force behind a single swing to make it lethal. Neither of these drawbacks were a problem for the superhuman mobile weapons, however. They could calculate exactly where to intercept enemy attacks and they always hit hard.

"I call it the Field Knife. It's a superb creation, if you ask me. It caught you by surprise, didn't it?"

"It sure did! I wish you'd told me about it sooner!"

While Koutarou and Elexis were exchanging banter, they were both hard at work. Koutarou dodged attack after attack while unleashing lightning from his sword. Meanwhile, Elexis was sniping at the mobile weapons to keep them from closing in on Koutarou. They fought like veteran men of valor.

El seems to be having fun...

Their teamwork deserved special praise. They worked in perfect concert like battle brothers who'd been doing this for years, and their back and forth only strengthened that impression. In reality they were just looking out for each other's openings and keeping them covered, but Maya could swear Elexis was having fun. And that put in her a bad mood. Elexis was showing Koutarou a side of himself he'd never shown her.

"Sorry, sorry. It won't work against your other sword, so I thought you'd be fine."

"You still should've told me!"

Koutarou had one sword in each hand. In his right was Alaia's Signaltin and in his left was Theia's Saguratin. Having learned his lesson, he swung his left this time to attack the mobile weapon.

"And sooner!"

Saguratin's physical blade was stopped by the Field Knife, but not its ethereal blade. The spiritual energy the sword projected passed right through its barrier and cut into the mobile weapon, damaging it badly. There was one small explosion after another on the inside, and eventually the entire machine powered down. Observing this, Elexis nodded.

"I suspected as much would happen with these specs..."

Magic could be stopped by scientific means to some extent, but it was powerless against spiritual energy. Spiritual energy would take either spiritual energy or magic to block, but producing machines that used those was difficult. Moreover, Elexis wanted to keep the new technologies he'd discovered a secret he could use against Vandarion later. But without them, this outcome was inevitable. Koutarou would always get the better of purely mundane armaments. And while Elexis was happy Koutarou was able to deal with the

threat in front of him, he was also sad to see his creations so easily defeated. He was conflicted.

“El, if you space out like that, your little boyfriend is gonna run off without you.”

“Oh no! You’re right!”

Elexis had stopped to ponder the situation, and Maya admonished him for letting his mind wander from the battle at hand. Elexis quickly got back to supporting Koutarou, who was already going for the next mobile weapon. It would be dangerous to let him take it on alone.



Ugh, men really are...!

Maya had been as sarcastic as she could be, but Elexis ran off without even noticing. She felt like she was spinning her wheels, which only worsened her mood.

“Stop playing around and get to work!”

“Don’t worry! I’m here now!”

The battle in the woods was progressing in the Satomi knights’ favor. The cooperation between Koutarou and Elexis and the members of Darkness Rainbow was exceptional, and they were working steadily to take out the enemy forces. All seemed well until an unexpected piece of bad news arrived.

“Koutarou, this is bad! Yurika is in over her head!”

“What?!”

Theia, who was late arriving after staying behind to organize the other troops, came bearing a grim report of the situation over at the trailer. According to her, Yurika was in danger.

“Tell me what’s going on, Theia!”

“There were apparently enemies lying in wait over there too—big ones!”

The faction squad and Yurika had found themselves struggling with an unexpected ambush. The soldiers had notified the rest of the squad that had stayed behind with their commander in the woods, who had then relayed the situation to Theia.

“Can you finish up here, Elexis?”

“If you have to leave so soon, then get going!”

“Grab on, Koutarou!”

Koutarou and Theia made a quick decision. He grabbed hold of her Combat Dress and she set her thrusters to full power. They sputtered flame and carried Theia and Koutarou off in no time flat. They sailed through the air like a missile on a course for Yurika.

The ambush waiting for Yurika at the trailer was a load of defensive weaponry. While the trailer had been disguised as a civilian vehicle, it was really a military craft loaded with heavy machine guns, small missiles, and other nasty surprises. Yurika had been far enough away when they opened fire that she was able to avoid getting hit, but she wouldn't be so lucky if she pressed onward. Not even Yurika was foolish enough to continue such a dangerous charge.

"Multiple Energy Bolts! Targeting Option: Auto Homing!"

Using Theia's normal behavior as a guideline, Yurika cast an attack spell to destroy the weapons before she could get shot. She let loose a storm of energy bolts that sought out the armaments like magical missiles. However, the spell dispersed before it ever reached the trailer.

"A barrier?!"

Indeed, the trailer was equipped with a barrier.

"It's impossible for me to break through that! What should I do?!"

Yurika's magic could easily break through a military-grade barrier for personal use. Barriers designed to protect vehicles, however, were equipped with generators in a completely different league. Breaking through it on her own would be next to impossible. The faction troops she was with had anti-vehicle weapons, so they might be able to get by with those. But if they turned out to be too strong, they would just blow up the trailer and the virus weapon inside. Torn over what to do, Yurika took her distance from the trailer. If she recklessly charged in, she'd be nothing but a target.

"In that case... I'll have to make a daring move!"

Yurika stopped to think for a moment, but she hadn't forgotten that she needed to be swift in her judgements. Quickly deciding on a course of action, Yurika contacted the commander once more.

"Sorry, but where is the barrier generation device on that trailer?!"

"It's the dome on the rear of the unit!"

"Got it!"

"What are you planning to do?!"

“I have an idea! Please proceed as planned!”

Yurika turned her broom around and headed back towards the trailer while incanting a spell.

“Recall Precast Teleport!”

High-ranking magicians like Yurika could cast certain spells ahead of time and keep them in an idle state until needed. The spell Yurika had incanted was one such example—a teleportation spell. Since teleporting even short distances was taxing, teleportation spells were some of the most commonly precast spells in the magician world.

Blue mana coalesced on the tip of Yurika’s broom before wreathing her entire body.

“Gooooo!”

The incredible amount of mana gathering around her warped space itself. Yurika disappeared into the light as if in a fog... and suddenly appeared atop the back end of the trailer. She’d successfully teleported through its barrier.

“If I can just destroy this...!”

The instant she landed, her broomstick turned back into her staff. Holding it in both hands, she pointed its tip at the dome-shaped device in front of her—the barrier generator.

“Terrible Thunder Lance! Modifier: Empower!”

Standing on top of the trailer, Yurika was so close that neither the machine guns nor missile launchers could fire right away. Certain safety measures would have to be disengaged, and the weapons would have to be operated manually. But in the time that would take, Yurika could cast at least one spell. She chose potent red magic that created a powerful electric bolt.

“Here goes nothing!”

The bolt exploded with a loud boom that rattled the very air as it easily pierced the trailer’s armor, shorting all of the circuits within. The generator seized up, completely fried, and the barrier around the trailer disappeared. Though there had definitely been an explosion, there was no sign of the fiery,

widespread destruction one would have expected from an attack like that. Yurika had carefully chosen a directional spell to precisely attack exactly what she was aiming for.

“Wha?!”

But luck was also on her side. After overloading the barrier generator, the electrical surge of her attack spread out through the trailer’s other systems, destroying them as it went. When all was said and done, the trailer completely lost power. Its buoyancy system abruptly cut off, it crashed some dozen centimeters into the ground below.

“Kyaaaaah!”

The sudden impact forced Yurika to grab the barrier generator she’d just destroyed and hold on for dear life. After skidding down the road for a while, the trailer finally came to a halt.

“...D-Did it stop?”

Yurika opened one of her tightly closed eyes and took a quick look around. The trailer had indeed stopped in the middle of the road, and there was smoke was rising from various parts of its frame. But all in all, it hadn’t seemed to have sustained any compromising damage. That was a testament to how sturdily it was built. It was meant to last, even with its power cut.

“That’s right! I have to hurry!”

Yurika didn’t know the real reason the trailer had come to a stop. She didn’t know if some integral component had been destroyed or if some sort of safety had been tripped with the power surge. She didn’t know if it was offline for good or if it would be back up and running before long. Whatever the case, she had a lot to get done—and fast.

“Commander-san, please come right away! It’s safe now!”

“Well done, Yurika-dono! We’ll be there post haste!”

Yurika contacted her allies with her bracelet and cast a few more spells to destroy the remaining machine guns and missile launchers. Once that was taken care of, she swiftly headed towards the trailer’s rear hatch where she met up

with the approaching strike force.

“Just give me a moment, Miss Knight! I’ll get it open right away!”

One of the military engineers approached the hatch, ready to cut off the lock and bust the trailer open. His blowtorch spewed extremely high temperature plasma, which sheared off the lock in seconds flat right before everyone’s eyes. They’d have the trailer open in no time... Or, at least that was what everyone was thinking when the hatch door suddenly flew open with enough force to send the engineer flying backward.

“Aaaaaaaah!”

He crashed right into Yurika, knocking her flat on her butt. The engineer’s eyes were spinning, but fortunately, neither he nor Yurika nor were seriously injured. Once she confirmed that much, Yurika looked up to figure out what had happened.

“What...?”

That was when she laid eyes on a giant pair of legs. She then looked up even more and saw a stocky robot in thick armor sitting on top of them.

Unlike poison, a virus would self-replicate once it infected someone. That’s why a large amount of it wasn’t strictly necessary in a bioweapon. Vandarion was able to cram all of the virus he had into a single container, leaving him to fill the rest of the trailer with whatever he so desired. He’d chosen a large mech just in case the trailer happened to be attacked before it reached its destination or ran into other trouble.

“This is... the first giant!”

Yurika had seen this mech before. Not in person, but in recorded footage. It was the large mobile weapon that Elexis had used when he first appeared as Ruth’s fiancé.

Elexis had now been through multiple iterations of his personal mech, and the Warlord series held many secrets he’d yet to supply to the Imperial Army. The original model, however, was now in production and widely available for sale. Like the mobile weapons that Koutarou and the others were fighting in the woods, it wasn’t equipped with spiritual energy technology or magic, but it did

pack one hell of a punch. It was considerably more powerful than the Imperial Army's standard units, making it a very dangerous machine.

"Commander-san, fall back right away!"

"We won't abandon you, Yurika-dono!"

"This isn't an opponent that will go so easy on you!"

Yurika's intuition told her that if she was just up against the mech and the mech alone, she should be able to handle it herself. If there were two, she could still win with the soldiers' backup. Three would be an all hands on deck situation, and four would have them at a disadvantage... But in grand total, there were six of them. Yurika had only seen the one, but the other five were now emerging.

"Retreat right now! And call for Theia-chan and Satomi-san! We need their help!"

Yurika quickly began incanting a defensive spell. If they went head to head with the mechs, she and the soldiers would be summarily wiped out. All Yurika could do for now was cover the soldiers while they retreated and wait for Koutarou and Theia.

Once they were up in the air, Theia and Koutarou could see Yurika struggling from a distance. She was over a kilometer away, but their AIs enhanced their visuals to show them exactly what was going on. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Yurika was covered in scratches and dirt, doing her best to hold her ground. She was using defensive spells and illusions to stave off the attacks of six mechs all on her own. But in spite of the grim situation, there was an uncharacteristically resolute gleam in her eye.

"Yurika is really in trouble! Theia!"

"I know! Cover your ears!"

"Just don't hit the trailer!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?!"

Theia repeatedly fired the large anti-material cannons on her shoulders. The

shells flew faster than the eye could see and assaulted the mech about to attack Yurika. They didn't explode on impact, but instead hammered through the mech's barrier and crushed its right arm.

"Theia, can you follow after me?!"

Once Theia attacked, the mechs—or more accurately, their pilots—turned their attention her way. Koutarou could see their hostility being redirected in the form of what looked like laser sights. Avoiding those was the key to avoiding their attacks. The only hitch was that Theia couldn't see them. Koutarou's workaround would be having her follow directly after him while he weaved in between them.

"Like I said, who do you think you're talking to?!"

Theia easily kept up with Koutarou and his aerial acrobatics, both of them dodging the enemy fire like it was some sort of dance. The only threat Koutarou couldn't avoid with his spirit sight happened to be guided missiles, but Theia readily shot them down from a distance as they went.

"...To my beloved princess."

Those words unwittingly slipped Koutarou's lips in the heat of the moment. He was so in awe of Theia's splendid maneuvering that he couldn't help admiring her. Her athletic ability, kinetic vision, and reflexes were all beyond compare. Being able to handle herself like that *and* shoot at the same time... Theia was truly peerless.

"This isn't all I've got!"

"Hey, don't get too full of yourself! That's dangerous!"

Eventually, Theia and Koutarou's movements started to fall out of synch. Theia had intentionally created a lag in their timing to afford her opportunities to attack and support Yurika, but it also afforded the enemy a chance to attack her. Koutarou was worried.

"You only think it's dangerous because you're just looking at the spiritual energy! Regardless of their intentions, they can't hit what's physically impossible to hit!"

In the end, it seemed Theia was right this time. Her confidence came from the fact that her battle sensors had already analyzed the mechs' attack patterns, and she now had her own way of avoiding incoming shots while counterattacking. Koutarou was worried for nothing.

"...As you wish, my princess."

Koutarou gave up on trying to object and instead focused on avoiding attacks as a reference for Theia. Satisfied with his decision, the edges of Theia's lips lifted up into a smile.

"Heh, that's more like it, my knight."

Now that Theia was counterattacking, the mechs were firing more strategically and less frequently. That gave Theia and Koutarou an opportunity to speed closer when they weren't trying to dodge.

"Are you okay, Yurika?!"

Before long, Koutarou touched down and slid along the ground for a good way before using his boosters to stop himself right in front of Yurika so he could defend her.

"You did good, Yurika!"

Theia's voice then came over Yurika's bracelet. She would be staying in the air to make full use of the mobility of her Combat Dress.

"S-Satomi-san! Theia-chan!"

Theia's sharpshooting had made Yurika's life on the front line much easier. After she nailed one of the mechs, they'd prioritized her as a target. That meant they eased up on Yurika, which kept her alive until Theia and Koutarou joined up with her.

"I'm okay somehow! But I'm so glad you came! I was almost at my limit..."

Yurika was cut up, burned, and scratched all over. She'd expended a good deal of her mana on the teleportation spell, and even more protecting the soldiers as she retreated. She was now so worn out and battered that she was getting dizzy.

"Everything's okay now. Just leave the rest to me and Theia... That's what I

want to tell you, but there's something I need you to handle first."

"The virus weapon?"

"You got it! Sneak in the trailer and figure out where it is while we deal with the mechs!"

Thanks to Yurika acting as a rearguard, the faction soldiers had been able to escape. With no one to protect, Koutarou and Theia should be able to handle the six mechs on their own. And while they were fighting, Yurika would move on to the main objective—finding the virus weapon. She was exhausted enough that she wouldn't be much more use in combat, so that was the most effective way to split the team.

"Okay! Then please give me a hand!"

Yurika gave a resolute nod and shakily lifted her staff once more. She'd have to wait for Theia and Koutarou to make her an opening to get past the mechs.

"Here I come!"

The first to move, as expected, was Theia. She fired several smoke grenades at the mechs' feet. The high-temperature smoke they released would blind both them and their heat sensors temporarily. It would be the perfect opportunity.

"Here we go, Yurika!"

"Right!"

Koutarou seized the moment and started running. His armor initiated a jamming sequence to keep the mechs from detecting his approach.

One in the center, three to the right, and two to the left... That means our best choice is to go to the left of the middle one.

Since the mechs were human-operated mobile weapons, Koutarou could see the auras of their pilots through the smoke. The mechs' engine noise and heavy footsteps also gave away their general locations.

"This should be enough of a handicap!"

Koutarou ran between two of the mechs, slashing at their legs as he went.

Since the mechs themselves had no aura, he was mostly guessing as to where exactly they were standing. He wasn't able to do too much damage that way, but he did manage to cripple them some.

"No, *this* is what you call a handicap!"

Audio data on the giants taken by Koutarou's armor was shared immediately with Theia's Combat Dress. Its firing control system analyzed that data to create holographic models and project them directly into Theia's vision. Now she could see the giants even through the smoke. She unloaded cannon shell after cannon shell, intentionally missing the pilots. Instead, her cannon storm smashed shoulders and arms left and right.

"All right, we're through!"

"We did it!"

While the mechs were being stalled by Theia's bombardment, Koutarou and Yurika safely made it past them. They fortunately hadn't been attacked along the way, and their defensive spell/barrier combo had protected them from the heat of the smoke.

"Go, Yurika! I've got your back! Just run!"

After they were behind the mechs, Koutarou stopped while Yurika continued running. They now had different roles to play.

"Right!"

Yurika continued forward at full speed as she was told. Her job was getting in the trailer and finding the virus weapon while Koutarou and Theia continued to stall the mechs. Each one of them would have to play their part for the plan to succeed.

"It's our turn now, Theia."

"No, it's my turn. You're only helping."

"Man, you really are angry."

"Of course I am! What princess wouldn't be to find out her people are being threatened with a bioweapon?!"

“I know what you mean. I’m not gonna let Vandarion get away with this.”

Yurika didn’t look back once. It never even crossed her mind that she might get attacked from behind. After all, she had Forthorthe’s strongest princess and a legendary knight covering her.

When the smoke cleared, what greeted the mech pilots was a golden flag projected aloft in the sky. Its lasers cut the pattern of a gorgeous flower in full bloom. Any Forthorthian citizen who saw it knew what it signified.

“That’s Princess Theiamillis’s crest...”

“So the rumors of her on the front lines were true...”

The royal families had protected Forthorthe without fail for the past two thousand years. It was no small matter to be confronted with a royal’s flag on the battlefield. It sent a message: surrender or lose. It was the exact same thing the eyes of the petite girl standing beneath the flag were saying.

“C-Calm down, men! Even if the royal families are undefeated, Empress Elfaria has committed crimes that should strip her of her royal rights and title! This princess is illegitimate!”

The mech squad captain tried to rally his men over their comms line, but it was all too clear he didn’t even believe the words coming out of his own mouth. His voice was trembling, especially when he insulted Elfaria. He was just repeating the lies he’d been fed.

“Besides, the battle has already begun! It’s too late to beg for forgiveness now!”

But in spite of what he believed, the squad captain pointed his large beam shotgun at Theia. It wasn’t an act of courage. No, it was nearly the opposite. He’d already fired on the princess and now felt cornered. Surrender wasn’t an option.

“You heard the captain! After him, before we’re all killed!”

“Raaaaah!”

The five subordinates followed after their advancing captain. They all knew

that the girl before them wasn't just a beauty; she was a born beast. If they stood still, she would devour them.

"Even raising my flag only bought a few seconds, huh...?"

Theia readied her weapons with a fearless smile. Even against six mechs, her confidence remained unwavering—quite the opposite of the mech pilots going up against a single girl.

"Yurika made it inside the trailer. That's enough, right?"

The knight guarding the princess readied a sword in each hand. He was wearing a powered suit of armor, but it was no match for the giant mechs. Under ordinary circumstances, the mech pilots would have no reason to be afraid. But for some reason the look in the princess's eyes and the color of knight's armor made them nervous... And it soon turned out they were right to be worried.

"Go, Koutarou!"

"As you wish, my princess!"

The knight charged forward while the princess backed him up. The missiles she fired kicked up a cloud of dust the knight dove right into. The pilots lost sight of him for a moment before he emerged on the other side, his sparkling swords swinging. In retaliation, the captain leading the mech charge readied his beam shotgun. He was planning on shooting the knight point blank as soon as the barrier repelled his sword.

"I-Impossible!"

The captain never got his chance, however. Contrary to all expectation, the knight's sword easily cut through the mech's barrier. There was no way he should have enough output from a personal generator for that to be possible... But while the captain was still reeling, the knight swung his other sword and cut a wide gash in the mech's thick armor.

"Uwaaaaaaaah! Don't come any closer!"

Thrown into a panic by the knight's attacks, the captain began firing his beam shotgun with reckless abandon. Fire though he might, however, the knight

dodged each and every one of the scattered beams with ease.

“I can’t hit him! I just can’t hit him!”

Shotgun beams scattered, making them ideal for trying to hit moving targets. But that wasn’t helping the captain at all right now. That was in part due to the knight reading ahead and dodging the captain’s attacks preemptively, but it was also because he was at such close range now that the beams didn’t have much of a chance to scatter.

“C-Captain?!”

“Don’t just stand there and watch! You fire too!”

“Understood!”

Seeing the captain struggling to hit the knight, the other mechs fired as one. The knight was too close to the captain, however, and they were only able to land a few safe shots. The scattered beams didn’t pack the same punch concentrated rifle beams did, and the knight’s barrier managed to block them all.

“They seem to be panicking.”

“There’s six of them, though. If they just worked together, they’d have this in the bag.”

Of course, the knight didn’t just sit there and take the mechs’ attacks. In the brief stops between his dodges, he’d regroup with the princess and target the mechs’ weak spot: their legs. After too many blows, they were all moving much slower than before.

“It’s not like there are six of Elexises piloting them. Besides, this is their first time seeing us in action.”

“So they’re dealing with unfamiliar enemies and unable to make full use of their equipment, huh?”

While things were becoming one-sided, that wasn’t because the mechs were weak. It also wasn’t because the princess and the knight had an unfair advantage of some kind. The fundamental problem was that the pilots were floundering with weapons they hadn’t mastered against enemies they didn’t

know. Moreover, the tremendous pressure they felt going up against royalty was eating away at their nerves.

“Hey, Theia! I said don’t get reckless!”

“It’s okay. This way...”

The princess who’d been supporting the knight from the rear was suddenly front and center. She pointed the large piledriver attached to her left arm at the mech standing before her.

“This way, they’ll panic even more!”

The hammer head sent flying by a loud explosion easily blew the mech’s head clean off. The pilot inside could now look up through his makeshift sunroof and see the princess with his own two eyes.

That’s Her Highness! That is without a doubt Princess Theiamillis!

The sight of Princess Theiamillis bathed in sunlight as her piledriver blew steam was truly awe-inspiring, if not outright divine. But it only lasted for a moment. She soon activated her boosters and vanished as quickly as she’d come, leaving the mech pilot wallowing in a confused sense of wonder and defeat. They didn’t stand a chance against her.

“U-Uwaaaaaaaaaah!”

Eventually the hopelessness and regret he was feeling spread through the entire squad. Once despair stuck its claws in their hearts, their performance dropped significantly. After that, the knight and princess took a decisive upper hand in the battle. While the princess had been reckless, the end result was quite safe. The pilots were simply overwhelmed into submission.

Yurika successfully snuck in the rear of the trailer just as Koutarou and Theia were beginning their fight with the mechs outside. Once she was inside, she got a new sense of appreciation for just how big it was. It was easily three times the size of a standard trailer on Earth.

“All right, the virus containment vessel... virus containment vessel...”

Yurika began exploring the trailer and quickly stumbled upon six metal

fixtures where she figured that the mechs had been secured. She was fairly certain the virus wouldn't be kept anywhere near them to avoid any potential accidents while they were boarding or disembarking the trailer.

"This probably isn't it either... It should be something more sturdy. Besides, this doesn't have any 'Danger!' stickers on it or anything."

Yurika eyed a stack of large boxes as she moved deeper into the trailer, but none of them were particularly remarkable. Not even Yurika was silly enough to think a deadly virus would just be lying around in a cardboard or plastic shipping box. She peeked inside just in case, but it was just food and ammunition. In other words, normal supplies.

"W-Wait, th-this is..."

However, as she was rummaging through the supplies, her eyes fell on a strange white box that had been mostly concealed by the others. Its appearance was completely unique; nothing else in the trailer looked anything like it. It was made entirely out of metal and there was a distinct mechanical sound coming from it. Moreover, it was decorated with several bilious red and yellow marks.

"This is it! This has to be it!"

The markings on the box were familiar to Yurika. They were written in Forthorthian, but she'd seen the same kind of symbols on boxes in Theia's Blue Knight. They were exactly the kind of "Danger!" signifiers she was looking for.

"I should check it to be sure, but before that... just in case..."

Yurika set the box down and touched the tip of her staff to the lid. She didn't know the state of what was inside, so she was going to use magic to find out.

"Clairvoyance!"

Yurika incanted a spell that allowed her to see through things, giving her a clear view of the contents of the box.

"Could this black stuff be the virus weapon?!"

Nestled inside the box was a small, metallic pedestal. Affixed to that was a clear, cylindrical case. The pedestal looked sturdy enough that shaking the box

wouldn't loose the cylindrical case atop of it. In fact, the whole affair seemed to be safe and sound in place even after the commotion with the trailer's emergency stop earlier. The only thing moving inside was the dark, thick liquid swirling in the cylindrical case every time one of the giant mechs took a step outside.

"It looks so muddled and yucky... but I should be able to open the box. I don't have any time to waste, so I have to be bold!"

After looking inside the box and confirming that it was safe to open, Yurika grabbed the handle on the side and pulled it down. The whole side of the box with the handle appeared to be an access panel, and its hinges creaked a little when it opened. A hissing puff of cold air came spewing out. It seemed the mechanical sounds coming from the box were the motor and compressor keeping its contents cold. It was essentially a small refrigerator.

"There's no mistaking it... This is it..."

Yurika felt something very ominous when she saw the black liquid within the case with her own eyes rather than through magic. Her gut told her that this was definitely the virus weapon she was looking at.

"Th-That's right, I have to tell— Wait, huh?"

Just when Yurika was about to activate her bracelet and let everyone know she'd located the virus, she noticed something strange attached to the cylindrical case containing it. It was a metallic box with a small screen that displayed characters that changed regularly.

"What is this...?"

Perplexed, Yurika held her bracelet closer to the case and activated the translation assistant rather than the comms line. A weak laser fired out from the bracelet, scanning the characters on the screen and displaying them as characters she could understand.

"It says 59, 58, 57, 56... What are these numbers?"

Unsure what they meant, Yurika tilted her head in confusion. Thinking about it, however, the very shape of the box in front of her called something to mind. It looked an awful lot like something she sometimes saw in the anime and

manga she so loved.

“N-No, this isn’t... Is it?!”

Yurika’s gut told her she was on the money, which was terrible news. It was bad enough that she bypassed activating the safety and encryption measures on her bracelet, and instead broadcast over all channels immediately.

“I found the virus weapon! But it’s attached to a bomb! It’s going to blow in less than a minute!”

The displayed numbers were a countdown.

The small box was a bomb.

The virus weapon packed into the trailer had been set to explode on its own when the time came.

Vandarion had put a great deal of care and thought into his bioweapon scheme. If the virus didn’t blow and spread at the right time or place, he knew it would come back to bite him.

The first variable in the equation was whether or not Elfaria’s faction would come to destroy the trailer. That was easy enough to plan for by planting the fake squad to do the job if they never showed up.

But that alone wasn’t enough to satisfy Vandarion. He was also worried that Elfaria might somehow find out the trailer contained a bioweapon. If she did, she would undoubtedly send troops to contain it. They might even be able to defeat Vandarion’s planted squad. Or maybe it wouldn’t be that complicated at all. Perhaps the planted squad would simply be discovered and blow the whole plan. Either way, Vandarion needed some kind of insurance he would get his explosion regardless of what went wrong. And his chosen policy? A strategic bomb.

The bomb he had built was of a very elaborate design and carried two charges. The first was a small explosion intended to spread the virus. The second was a much larger explosion to destroy the virus weapon in the event it was compromised. It wouldn’t necessarily destroy all of the virus itself, but the case and all evidence it was being transported by Vandarion’s men would be

history.

The current countdown was ticking down to the first explosion. It would be enough to make it look like Elfaria's faction had attacked and destroyed the trailer. Anyone who was close enough to see that wasn't really what had happened would soon be killed by the virus the explosion released. Elfaria's faction was so small that there was no way they had the manpower or resources to quarantine the area before it spread, allowing Vandarion's forces to cover up the evidence at their leisure.

Hearing Yurika's alarming report, Theia quickly fired off a flare and shouted into her comms device.

"To everyone hearing this message: regardless of your affiliation, withdraw immediately! Get as far away from the trailer on the hill as you can! If possible, head upwind!"

Theia's warning blared across all frequencies and the flare she sent into the sky sent the same message for kilometers. With the bioweapon about to blow, there wasn't a second left to spare for fighting. The faction squad dutifully obeyed Theia and began an immediate retreat. But as expected, the Imperial Army troops didn't budge.

"A virus weapon?!"

"And a time bomb?!"

"Wh-What do we do, captain?!"

They'd heard both Yurika and Theia's emergency broadcasts, but they couldn't believe their ears. They'd been stationed in the forest upon being told that Elfaria's faction would be transporting a trailer of mobile weapons through the area. They hadn't heard a word about any kind of weaponized virus. If Yurika and Theia were telling the truth, they knew they needed to evacuate immediately. But if this was a ruse to confuse them and they fell for it, they would be in serious trouble with their superiors. Essentially, they were stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"Driver, do you read me?!"

The only imperial soldier who remained calm was the mech squad captain. He quickly opened his comms line and radioed the trailer driver.

“L-Loud and clear!”

“Confirm what they’re saying with the cameras in the cargo compartment! Can you see what they’re talking about?!”

“Hang on a sec... Y-Yeah, I can! A refrigerated container with warning markings over it! It’s open and there’s a girl standing over it!”

The driver relayed the camera feed to the mech pilots’ cockpits. In it, they could see a horrified Yurika staring into an open container.

“Damn it!”

The squad captain pulled his emergency lever to blow open his cockpit hatch. He quickly jumped out of his unit and made a run for the trailer, his weapon drawn.

“Captain, where are you going?!”

“You guys fall back! I’m going to see it for myself!”

The captain was acting out of a sense of duty. He knew Yurika and Theia were most likely telling the truth, but he just couldn’t withdraw without any proof. He needed to confirm for himself that there was a virus and a bomb.

“Understood, captain!”

“Send out the retreat signal! Use all frequency bands to keep civilians and allies from approaching!”

The mech squad pulled away from the trailer and began retreating in an orderly fashion. The heavily damaged units were left behind, and their pilots were picked up by their squadmates.

“Theia, we’re going too!”

“Yurika, wait there! We’re en route!”

With the Imperial Army retreating, Koutarou and Theia could move freely. They turned their backs on the mechs and made a beeline for the trailer. When they reached the hatch, Yurika appeared from inside. She was carrying the

containment vessel, but her legs were wobbling underneath her from its weight.

“Miss, give that over here!”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

Seeing Yurika struggle, the squad captain took the containment vessel from her. But once he got a good look at it, his countenance turned grim.

They weren't joking... This is a bioweapon with a live bomb. Damn it, this means we were just pawns!

While there was no telling if the virus was real or not, the very fact that it was in the trailer lent credibility to Yurika and Theia's claims. Realizing that, the captain lost all his will to fight. It was completely drained from him when he realized he was nothing more than a sacrificial pawn. In its place, anger at the military top brass flared up

“How does it look?!”

“Your Highness, there's only thirty seconds left on the countdown!”

The captain obediently reported to Theia like he was a faction soldier. His anger at the military had inspired a change of heart.

“Can't you defuse it?!”

“There's no time for that! If we'd found it five minutes earlier...”

The actual charge attached to the containment vessel wasn't anything special. With enough time, the captain could certainly defuse it—but thirty seconds wasn't anywhere close to enough time. Defusing it was out of the question.

“Can't we just separate the bomb and toss it?”

“If we try to force it off, the whole thing will explode! We'll only hasten its detonation!”

“Which means we only have one option...”

After hearing the discussion between Theia and the captain, Koutarou opened the front of his armor and quickly stepped out of it.

“What are you going to do, Koutarou?!”

“Let’s gather all fuel we can find to make the explosion bigger. We’ll burn the virus up when it blows.”

“I see... That’s one heck of a gamble, but it may be all we can do now.”

Koutarou’s idea was simply to incinerate the virus. If they just waited for the bomb to go off, it would spell disaster. They didn’t have time to defuse the bomb or eject it into space. That left them with only one option: maximize the explosion in hopes of burning up the virus. If they sacrificed the generator from Koutarou’s armor and all the ammunition they had on hand, they should be able to significantly increase the temperature of the explosion when it went off. But even then, there was no guarantee the virus would be completely incinerated. The risks were dangerously high.

“Then let’s—”

“W-Wait! I can do something!”

However, as they were about to put the plan in motion, Yurika stopped them. The exhaustion seemed to have left her, and she stood tall as a magical girl.

“Can you, Yurika?!”

“There’s no guarantee it’ll work, but I think it’d be better than just making the explosion bigger!”

“Then we’ll leave it to you! Show us what you can do, Yurika!”

Seeing the resolve in Yurika’s eyes, Theia didn’t hesitate to defer to her. She knew Rainbow Yurika was someone she could trust with her life.

“Right!”

Yurika nodded firmly and held her staff in both hands. There was barely any time left. She had to start right away.

“Everyone, just in case, please get around me and put up your barriers. Even if this fails, that might be enough.”

Only ten seconds remained. Time was up. This was do or die. They wouldn’t get another chance. This would be their first and final move. Yet Yurika wasn’t shrinking back. She stepped right up to the plate, her eyes and voice full of determination.

“Perfect Force Field! Modifier: Maximize!”

For some reason, Yurika was incanting a defensive spell. Strangely, she poured all of her remaining mana into it. And even stranger still, she cast it on the containment vessel resting on the floor.

“You’re planning to contain the explosion with that spell?! But even then—”

“No! The real battle starts here!”

Yurika interrupted Theia and brandished her staff. She apparently wasn’t done with her spell.

“Field: Close!”

The force field Yurika cast was a globe that stretched over ten meters in diameter with the containment vessel at its center. But with her follow-up incantation, that globe began shrinking. Ten meters became eight and then six... From there, it contracted rapidly.

“Yurika, it’s exploding!”

“Gooooo!”

The bomb attached to the containment vessel detonated as Yurika’s defensive spell reached a concise diameter of two meters. The explosion going off inside it made it shine like a small sun. But Yurika still didn’t lose her nerve. She continued to shrink her field smaller and smaller.

“I see, Yurika! That’s what you were thinking!”

There, Theia finally realized what Yurika was up to. To start, she’d created a spherical globe that contained a finite amount of air. She then compressed that air as much as she could, shrinking the globe down to what was now smaller than a single meter in diameter. The explosion occurring inside had nowhere to go, and its drastically reduced size proportionately increased its pressure and temperature. Perhaps inspired by her earlier nightmare, Yurika was generating heat the intensity of which she’d never experienced until going through reentry.

“H-Hrrrrrgh! Ngggh! Aaaaaaaaah!”

Of course, that put a great deal of strain on Yurika’s force field and ultimately Yurika herself. It got bad enough that globe began wavering like it was about to

disappear at any minute.

“Signaltn, lend Yurika your power!”

That was where Koutarou jumped in to give Yurika a hand. He tapped into Signaltn’s vast mana and channeled it directly into Yurika. The moment the white light touched Yurika, it turned yellow and the force field grew stronger.

“Now how about this?!”

With Koutarou’s help and Signaltn’s mana, Yurika mustered the last of her strength to compress the field even further. The globe was now just a few centimeters in diameter. And contained within it was the compressed fury of an explosion meant to ruin Alaia. The pressure and temperature were so intense that they momentarily exceeded what one could expect in atmospheric reentry. There was no conceivable way the virus had survived that hellscape.



By the time it was all over, Yurika had lost consciousness though she was still gripping her staff. She'd given it her all until the bitter end, and maybe even then some. The staff still clutched in her hands was perhaps the greatest testament ever to her worth as a magical girl of love and courage.

"You did good, Yurika..."

Koutarou picked up Yurika and slung her over his back. When he did, he could finally feel her muscles relax. Even though she was passed out, she now looked strikingly like she did when she was just lazing about.

"It looks like the virus was completely incinerated... Well done, Yurika."

In the direction Yurika's staff was pointing lay nothing but ash and the remnants of the melted containment vessel. Anything inside had been burned to a crisp. That much was clear to anyone.

"Make sure you thank her properly when she wakes up."

"I know that. Don't just assume I'm as uncouth as you."

The lighthearted banter between Theia and Koutarou was a welcome change of pace after the harrowing situation they'd just escaped. Even the mech captain couldn't help thinking so. He casually listened to them as he lay sprawled out and exhausted some distance away. It was just the four of them for a few moments before a fifth party arrived on the scene.

"Phew... Looks like everything turned out okay in the end."

"That you, Elexis?"

When Koutarou looked up, he saw Elexis, Maya, and six dark magical girls. With Elexis in the lead, they landed one after another just outside the trailer. They all looked spent, but not hurt.

"Indeed. And I must say, Koutarou-kun, I believe we have a mutual problem."

"I know. Whether to settle things between us or not, right?"

With Vandarion's virus weapon behind them, things would go back to normal between Elexis and Koutarou. That meant they'd return to being enemies, which would in turn mean a fight.

“Honestly, fighting here wouldn’t be any good. There are too many eyes on us,” Elexis said with a casual shrug.

The mech captain was within earshot, and Vandarion undoubtedly had press somewhere nearby to record the event. Moreover, the army likely had satellites trained on them. If Elexis wanted to fight Koutarou now, it could spell the end of his alliance with Vandarion after what he’d just done. Koutarou had a sword that could dispel magic, meaning he could expose Elexis’s disguise at any time.

“And we’re outnumbered,” said Koutarou with a shrug of his own.

The way Koutarou saw it, they were at a clear disadvantage. With Yurika unconscious, it would be two against eight. There was no way Theia and Koutarou could hack that. They’d surely take a few of Elexis’s team down with them, but they were already exhausted.

“So as a compromise... why don’t we just get along for today? To avoid ruining each others’ futures.”

In the end, Elexis suggested they extend their temporary truce. Both sides had good reason not to fight right now. If they stubbornly insisted on it anyway, it would cost them all dearly. It would be pointless.

“What shall we do, Theia?”

“Hmm...”

Theia’s brow furrowed intensely upon hearing Elexis’s proposal. She didn’t like backing down from a fight. Moreover, she believed it was her duty as a royal to always charge ahead.

“Princess, you better hurry up and decide to play nice with us already. Crim-chan is just itching for a fight.”

“How rude. I can think about the future too.”

However, Orange and Crimson’s exchange calmed Theia down. Fighting was easy, but when she thought about the future—not just her future, but the future of her nation and its people—fighting here was foolish. Even the legendary Princess Alaia had once cast aside her pride for her country. There was no reason Theia shouldn’t too.

“Fine. We accept your terms.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Maya flashed a meaningful smile when Theia acquiesced. In truth, she also wanted to fight. But she'd backed down for the sake of her own people. She wanted to secure a future where the Folsarians could return to Forthorthe. And in that sense, her position wasn't all that different from Theia's. Her smile, really, was a sign of sympathy.

“But tomorrow, we'll go back to being enemies. And we'll be sure to defeat you!”

“That's just the way we want it. But for the record, we'll be the victors.”

Theia and Maya stared each other down dauntlessly. They were on the same page even now. Seeing it, Elexis couldn't help chuckling before leaning over and whispering to Koutarou...

“It looks like we're both having a hard time courtesy of the fairer sex.”

“Looks like it.”

Elexis was without a doubt an enemy. He and Koutarou never saw eye to eye on anything and they'd both put each other through the wringer. Yet right now, after the danger they'd overcome, they could share a laugh together. They were equally willing to put aside their differences for the time being.

“Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't catch that, you insubordinate fool!”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, El?!”

Alas, both Theia and Maya had incredibly keen hearing. But when they grew infuriated the same way, Koutarou and Elexis exchanged a knowing look before sighing and slumping their shoulders in unison.

The Silver Sword

Wednesday, November 24th

When he first heard the report from Granado, Vandarion could scarcely believe his ears. That was just how confident he'd been in his plan.

"Is this true, Granado?! They truly managed to contain the virus?!"

"There's no doubt about it. Princess Theiamillis herself took control of the situation, and the virus was disposed of before it had a chance to spread."

"To think she could see through all of that... Curses!"

Unable to contain himself, Vandarion slammed his hulking fist into his sofa's armrest. The sofa was made of high quality wood and was rather well constructed, but even it creaked under the weight of his rage. That was just how forceful the blow was.

"Get to investigating where the information leak came from right away!"

"I have already ordered an investigation, my lord. However, Vandarion-sama, there is an even greater problem at hand."

"What now?!"

Vandarion was in a foul mood, and his tone betrayed his aggression. But Granado had known Vandarion for a long time and was quite familiar with these outbursts. He knew that Vandarion's anger was not directed at him, and so he calmly continued to operate the nearby control panel.

"Please take a look at this."

Vandarion and Granado were currently in Vandarion's private room. Since it was where he spent most of his personal time, it was richly decorated with art and lavish furniture. But since he and Granado frequently used it for secret talks as well, he'd had it outfitted with a computer capable of generating large holograms. At Granado's instruction, said computer turned a specific video into

a hologram for Vandarion to view.

“This is...”

“This is footage from a recent news broadcast. Intentionally staging journalists at the scene ended up backfiring. They reported the incident in real time.”

Appearing on the hologram was Princess Theiamillis and a knight in blue armor serving as her guardian. They were fighting several large, humanoid-type mobile weapons. Their teamwork was flawless and despite the fight being two against six, they gradually wore the mobile weapons down. It was inspiring—exactly the kind of story the people just ate up.

The journalists who’d actually captured the video were reporters from a news outlet that had been there on what they believed to be unrelated business. Really, Vandarion had called for them, falsely believing he knew what would happen that day. He was betting on them capturing Elfaria’s faction blowing up the trailer and spreading the virus. It would even look like they’d done it on purpose, and the story would seem especially credible coming from a neutral news outlet. It would hamstring Elfaria and help slant public opinion against her. That was the plan.

However, Vandarion’s multilayered trap ended up becoming a flattering feature on the young princess and her cohorts. All the footage the journalists captured showed them in an exemplary light. Moreover, the situation itself was suspicious. Rumors began circulating that the army had actually been planning on using the bioweapon. It seemed the journalists had even picked up bits and pieces of Yurika and Theia’s emergency broadcasts about the bomb.

In the end, the entire thing had blown up in Vandarion’s face. Not only had Elfaria’s faction been able to prevent the virus outbreak, they’d likely collected any damning evidence that was to be had from the bomb. Then there was the snafu with the news. Vandarion’s reputation would undoubtedly take a hit for this. In the worst case scenario, the military could lose its support entirely. The whole thing could be described as nothing other than a massive blunder.

*My fear of that brat’s powergrab was what caused this in the first place...
Damn it!*

Vandarion was talking about Elexis. Knowing that Elexis had one up on him drove Vandarion to make a desperate play to try and get ahead. That folly would cost him.

“...Is this a warning that reckless pride will get the rug pulled out from under me?”

“The problem here was much more mundane than that. Pride is only a slight flaw comparatively.”

“So even if it wasn’t for my pride, the information still would have been leaked and the results would be the same? Is that what you’re saying? Mm... You certainly are calm, Granado.”

“In that sense, failing here has its advantages. There is still time to recover.”

Though public opinion might change, the Imperial Army still dramatically overwhelmed Elfaria’s faction in terms of manpower and resources. There was also the fact that Elfaria was still evading the law. So even if Vandarion had made a major blunder, it wasn’t fatal. Like Granado said, they could still recover from it.

“Then let us make a grand recovery indeed. We’ll stick to fair play for now.”

“I believe that is for the best. It should make it harder to catch us.”

Satisfied that Vandarion had regained his cool, Granado nodded. Granado was a stoic man, but he was clearly satisfied right now. He was displaying it on purpose. Sensing that, Vandarion put on a smile—something he rarely ever showed others.

“I’m glad to have you at my side, Granado.”

“I’m honored.”

“I’d like you to share some of that ice in your veins with me.”

“But I have none of the molten will you do, Vandarion-sama. Surely it was nothing other than destiny that brought our powers of fire and ice together.”

“Well said! If this is destiny, then I’m sure dominion of this country is in our hands!”

Vandarion had lost his head and sight of himself in a fit of rage. But he had a trusted comrade and old friend in Granado, which helped him regain his cool. Unless the bond between the two of them could be broken, Elfaria and Theia were still a long way from victory.

On the night following the virus incident, Yurika, Koutarou, and Theia were finally reunited with their friends at the base in the heart of Pardomshiha territory. The three of them arrived with captured imperial soldiers in tow, and it was only after hearing their story that the full extent of Vandarion's trap became clear.

The soldiers in the transport convoy had been lied to. They were told they were moving large mobile weapons to the front lines, and the metallic box that contained the virus weapon was explained away as chemicals intended for maintenance. And with the lies they'd been fed, they believed that Elfaria was after the mobile weapons when they fell under attack. That was why they'd deployed the mechs to counterattack. It never occurred to them that they were pawns protecting the trailer.

The fake faction soldiers stationed in the woods were in a similar boat. They had been told Elfaria's faction was transporting mobile weapons through the area. They'd been given instructions to disguise themselves and approach the trailer to destroy it. They didn't know there was a bioweapon inside, and they didn't know they'd be attacking their own comrades. If Theia and the others hadn't shown up, they too would have been sacrificial pawns. They would have been framed as faction soldiers that intentionally spread the virus, but the virus would have seen them dead before they ever went to trial.

Fortunately, however, everyone had come out on the other side of Vandarion's nasty plot alive. The captured imperial soldiers were grateful for it and readily shared their stories with Elfaria, who would record them all to use as ammunition in her showdown with Vandarion.

"Curse you, Vandarion! To think you'd use such a cruel plan... What do you take the lives of your allies and citizens for?! And you call yourself human?!"

Upon hearing the report on the situation, Theia was enraged. Her booming

voice echoed through the command room, startling Koutarou and everyone else wide awake.

“Calm down, Theia! They say the first person to lose their head is the first to lose, period!”

“I won’t lose! As if I would ever lose! I would never hand over Forthorthe and her citizens to such a heartless man!”

Unlike Elfaria who was angry but remained calm, Theia was erupting with rage. She couldn’t stand the thought of Vandarion using people’s lives like pawns in some game. It was like he was actively trying to trample over everything the royal families had worked so hard to protect. And that was the final straw. Theia was beside herself. Not even the words of her dearest friends could reach her now.

“Theia-chan really is a princess, isn’t she? Did you feel the same way inside when things were happening underground, Kiriha-san?”

“My heart was far from calm when I saw my hometown turned into a battlefield and my people being killed... I understand how Theia-dono feels.”

“I do as well. Alaia-sama felt the same way when she made her stand, although she was a bit more composed...”

While the girls of room 106 sympathized with Theia, none of them could find the right words to console her. They were in a different country on a different planet. The historical, cultural, and socio-political differences reduced them all to mere platitudes. It was hard not being able to comfort their suffering friend.

“Clan-san, you sure are calm, aren’t you? Is that just the difference in your dispositions?”

While everyone was struggling to say something, Maki turned to the one person who might be able to get through to Theia. That was Clan, a fellow princess of Forthorthe. But she blushed furiously when Maki dragged her into the spotlight.

“Our personalities are different, yes. But in my case, just over a year ago, I was... Um... What I mean to say is that I feel more regret and shame than anger...”

“I understand how you feel. I feel the same way about Darkness Rainbow.”

In Clan’s case, she had once been on the wrong side of an evil scheme. That’s why upon seeing Vandarion’s evil deeds, while she did feel anger, she was primarily forced to take a long look at herself and her past actions. The reflection and regret outweighed her anger. In order to reach out to Theia now, she’d have to get over her own past. And as a former member of Darkness Rainbow, Maki could relate to that.

“Then it’s Satomi-kun’s time to shine.”

“What? Why me?”

“You’re the only one who’s gone through this twice. Both two thousand years ago and today, right?”

Shizuka believed that Koutarou was the only one whose words would truly resonate with Theia. Koutarou had saved Forthorthe with Alaia in the past, and now he was here to do it again with Theia. That had to mean something. Shizuka was sure of it. If Koutarou couldn’t get through to Theia, no one could.

“Landlord-san, I’m not that special. Besides, I’m an Earthling.”

“Shut up! Get going!”

“Wh-Whoa!”

Shizuka refused to listen to Koutarou’s rebuttal and forcibly pushed him forward. With a martial artist’s touch, she sent him stumbling forward just enough to put him right in front of Theia.

“You agree with me, don’t you, Koutarou?!”

“I, uh...”

When Koutarou appeared before her, Theia looked to him for camaraderie and agreement. Since he hadn’t been listening to her for the past few moments, however, he didn’t know how to respond. Interpreting this as indifference, Theia turned her wrath on him.

“What?! You don’t?!”

“Calm down first, okay?”

“If you’re a knight, why wouldn’t you swear to defeat Vandarion?! Don’t you have any pride?!”

“Now, now...”

“You fool!”

Up until now, Theia’s anger had been directed at Vandarion who seemed remote and elusive. But Koutarou was right here. He made a much more convenient target. Koutarou didn’t know if this would do anything to help him get through to Theia, but at the very least, it would help calm her down some. The girls knew that as well, and so they gladly watched the beating commence.

When confronted with Theia’s intense rage, Koutarou at first tried to calm her down. But after a few minutes, he had lost his patience and they ended up butting heads in a shouting match. Things eventually turned physical, erupting into a full-on brawl.

Lord Pardomshiha went to break them up, but Ruth politely held him back. At first he didn’t understand why, but as he watched the brawl unfold, it started to make sense.

“Die! Just drop dead already, you damned disloyalist!”

“You crappy princess! I’m not gonna forgive you for this this time!”

“If you think you can do something about it, then I dare you to go ahead and try it!”

“I’ll beat you so bad that flat washboard of yours starts swelling!”

“Now you’ve said it, you hack knight! You didn’t even notice my chest has started to develop!”

Despite the intense screaming and wild fists flying, Theia and Koutarou actually meant each other no harm. And before long, Theia’s fury for Vandarion was single-mindedly refocused on Koutarou. This was perhaps her way of venting. Watching this all through adult eyes, Lord Pardomshiha reached a certain conclusion.

“So Princess Theiamillis is your rival in love, is she? Her Highness is a powerful

opponent, Ruth.”

Theia and Koutarou were just playing. This was Theia’s way of engaging him. Of saying she needed him. That’s why Elfaria and the others left them be. And by Lord Pardomshiha’s estimation, it took a truly special knight indeed to get into a fistfight with a princess.

“Father... You’re wrong. Her Highness is no opponent for me.”

Ruth went a little wide-eyed after hearing what her father said, but she eventually blushed a little and shook her head.

“That’s awfully confident of you.”

Lord Pardomshiha took Ruth’s response as a sign of confidence, which impressed him. Ruth was always so sincere and humble. However, Ruth smiled wryly and shook her head again.

“It’s the opposite. If anything, I have no confidence whatsoever.”

“What?”

“In order to get him to turn our way, Her Highness and I have to work together.”

“Is he that hard to deal with? He certainly doesn’t look like it...”

Ruth indicated it was hard for her to catch Koutarou’s eye, but Lord Pardomshiha believed him to be a perfectly normal teenage boy. Lord Pardomshiha knew he’d be laughed at for being such a doting father if he said it out loud, but could hardly imagine that Koutarou would be able to ignore Ruth’s charm.

“He’s more serious than me, firmly keeps to reason, and doesn’t hesitate to correct the mistakes of others, even if they’re royalty... He really is a model knight. And because of that, he’s untouchable.”

Deep trust and love could be seen in Ruth’s eyes when she spoke of Koutarou. But Lord Pardomshiha believed what she said. He knew Ruth wouldn’t have fallen in love with Koutarou if he weren’t sincere and upright. It was only the untouchable part he took issue with.

“At his age, I imagine a little sex appeal is all it would take to break him...”

“Impossible.”

Ruth adamantly shook her head. If Koutarou’s heart could be moved so easily, Ruth never would’ve gotten involved with him. It was because he didn’t move at all that her feelings for him had grown so.

“After all... not even Princess Alaia could sway him.”

Not even the legendary Silver Princess could convince Koutarou to stray from his ways as a knight. And if Alaia couldn’t do it, Ruth was certain she couldn’t.

“Princess Alaia?! What are you say— Wait!”

An idea flitted through Lord Pardomshiha’s mind and he frantically looked over at Koutarou. From his waist hung two swords, a golden and a silver one. Both had distinct crests carved into them. And then there was his armor. That brilliant blue...

Lord Pardomshiha suddenly felt like he’d been hit by a car.

“Impossible! Ruth, are you serious?! If so, then that boy’s—”

Lord Pardomshiha was starting to understand what Ruth was saying, but it was quite a shock. It was far easier to doubt his daughter’s sanity than to believe what she was telling him.

“It’s just as you suspect.”

“Wh-What?! Then that boy... That man...”

“That man is Satomi Koutarou-sama. He wears beautiful blue armor, wields a dazzling silver sword, has defeated a giant dragon, and saved the country in the middle of a coup d’etat. He is the legendary man—”

In contrast to Lord Pardomshiha’s increasing confusion, Ruth was extremely calm and spoke with great certainty about the man who was currently in the middle of a fistfight with Theia.

“—who was once known as Layous Fatra Veltlion.”

Ruth was proud. She was finally able to introduce her father to the man she loved. And as she did, she held her head high and smiled brightly.

“Are you saying that he’s the Blue Knight?!”

To Lord Pardomshiha, Ruth's confession was a jolt to the heart. He thought he might keel over on the spot.

With a private flight and Darkness Rainbow's magic, escaping from Planet Alaia wasn't all that difficult for Elexis and the girls. DKI wasn't under much scrutiny from the military. If anything, they were quite willing to look the other way thanks to Elexis's recent alliance with Vandarion. Needless to say, Elexis had no trouble making it back to DKI headquarters on Forthorthe by noon the next day.

"Watching news footage of yourself? Think you're some star, do you?"

"You've been trying to pick a fight with me since yesterday, Maya. Did I do something to upset you?"

"Not really. I'm the same as always."

First thing upon returning to his private room at HQ, Elexis turned on his computer. He was gathering information and had a particular interest in how the previous day's events were being reported. There was a lot he wanted to know, like how the public was responding and if his cover had been blown. And he'd get that information any way he could, whether it was reading the news or buying it from informants.

"Just do as you please. You don't have to mind me. I'll do my own thing too."

Maya sat down alone on the sofa in the corner and poured herself a glass of wine. Elexis knew she'd been in a sour mood since yesterday, though he didn't know why. He was sure, however, that if he were the reason, Maya would've left by now. Surely it had to be something else. Satisfied by that much, Elexis figured he'd join her as soon as he was done with what he was doing.

"Oh, come now. I'd love to join you for a drink. Just give me a minute. There's something that caught my interest."

"Something caught your interest?"

Seemingly pleased by what Elexis said, or perhaps having her own curiosity piqued, Maya picked up the bottle and two glasses before walking over to him.

“This video.”

Elexis shifted the hologram he was watching so Maya could see it too and replayed it from the start. It was a news segment run by one of Forthorthe’s major networks.

“This is footage of the battle yesterday, isn’t it?”

Maya peered at the video out of the corner of her eye as she handed Elexis a glass and began pouring. The mellow smell of a sweet wine made from Forthorthian fruits filled the room.

“That’s right. But this here is the important part.”

Elexis took a sip from his glass with his right hand while using his left hand to operate the panel. As he did, messages appeared as if surrounding the hologram. Information networks in Forthorthe allowed people to comment directly on parts of the video that stood out.

“What’s this? The boy’s completely buried in comments.”

“That’s right. Everyone has their eyes on Koutarou-kun.”

When Elexis paused the video on Koutarou, the screen was so littered with comments that he could no longer be seen. Only glimpses of his blue armor appeared through the text.

“But I know how they feel. And I think everyone’s reminded of a certain name we hear all too often when talking about the history of our nation...”

Elexis tapped on the panel again to clear away the comments. The last of the video was Koutarou dueling the giant mobile weapons. It then cut back to the studio where newscasters explained the details of the fight. Since Elexis knew all that already, he cut off the video and began playing another.

“It just so happens that there are a lot of links from that video to this one.”

“Oh... this is the boy too. And in private? Where did this come from?”

“Based on the height of the camera and the surroundings, it seems a child recorded it.”

“What? And it was leaked for some reason?”



“Something like that, I’d wager. But just take a look. You can see his inhuman speed.”

A video, most likely filmed by a young child, by the title of “The Blue Knight Found!” had been uploaded to Forthorthe’s pangalactic network some days ago. It was a montage of a teenage boy doing some rather impressive things.

At first, the video had been written off. What the boy had been recorded doing was so blatantly superhuman that everyone suspected the footage was doctored. But after the battle on Alaia, the “Blue Knight Found!” video started getting a lot more attention. The boy in the blue armor had been recorded with multiple cameras at multiple angles doing some truly extraordinary things. It seemed, then, that the original video of him posted online might be the real thing after all.

“And this is what’s truly extraordinary, Maya.”

Unlike the footage from Alaia, the “Blue Knight Found!” video was taken from up close. You could see the boy’s expression and his movements much better. But that wasn’t all. A certain possession of his had caught people’s eye.

“The boy’s... sword?”

“That’s right. This silver sword... I hadn’t really thought about it that much before, but if it’s *that* sword, then things are going to get a little complicated.”

Thinking it over again, Elexis realized there had been plenty of hints. The blue armor, his relationship with the princess, a giant red dragon... Moreover, he’d known that the Folsarians were descendants of Grevanas and his magicians. But most telling of all was that silver sword hanging at his waist in the hologram. Elexis had experienced its frightening power firsthand.

Though most of it was circumstantial evidence, it all seemed to point to the true identity of the boy in question. It was just so farfetched that the rational Elexis had discredited the possibility.

“‘*That* sword’?”

“The holy sword Signaltin. The sword of kingship. The sacred treasure of Forthorthe said to have been lost two thousand years ago.”

That was the real question. Was Signaltin the silver sword hanging from the boy's waist? After seeing Alaia's crest carved on it, many people had started to think so. And Elexis was one of them.

"Could Koutarou-kun be a descendant of the Blue Knight, I wonder? Or perhaps..."

If that sword really was Signaltin, whether the boy in the blue armor was the Blue Knight himself or just a descendant... A major player in the fate of Forthorthe had arrived on the scene.



Article 25

The ratifying parties of the Corona Convention have an obligation to actively announce the real weight of Kasagi Shizuka (resident of Corona House room 206) when meeting new people.



Corona Convention

New!

November 25th, 2010

Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. It's the author, Takehaya. This time I bring you volume 22. I wonder if you all have 24 (or 25 if you include the anime bonus) volumes lined up on your bookshelves? As the first volume was released in February of 2009, this volume marks that seven year anniversary of the series. When I think that people who bought the first volume in middle school have already begun their adult lives, I'm overcome with a strange feeling. As we enter year eight, I will continue my hard work to make sure that everyone can enjoy the series.

Now then, as for the contents of this volume, we follow along with Koutarou and the others who fell to the surface of Alaia at the end of the previous volume. There are enemies all over, but they'll have to break through somehow. The story will progress as they come across unexpected encounters and events along the way.

A slight problem I encountered along the way, however, is the pet situation in Forthorthe. Are there cats and dogs on Forthorthe like there are on Earth? Since its humans are almost the exact same, we already know that mammals exist. That leaves the question of whether or not cats and dogs evolved somewhere along the line.

Unlike Theia's worries regarding humans, there is no need for cats and dogs to be exactly the same. They only needed to look roughly the same. For example, a bulldog and a shiba inu are both dogs despite how different they look. There's a certain amount of wiggle room there where there isn't with Theia's concerns.

There are no doubts that Earth and Forthorthe have a similar environment. That just leaves the problem of whether or not similar creatures would arise from similar environments. In this regard, there is already an example on Earth. From long ago, there exists evidence of creatures living on different continents that evolved on their own and ended up looking very similar. Mammals and

marsupials are like that. While they are on completely different places on the evolutionary tree, there are several creatures that look the same. There might be a form living creatures inevitably assume based on their living conditions.

Environmental conditions on Earth and Forthorthe are similar. As a result, it's quite likely that similar creatures exist. There will of course be exceptions, but I believe it's safe to assume that animals by and large look similar between the two. So from there, I decided that cats and dogs do exist on Forthorthe. Maybe they have pouches to carry their young or maybe they have dramatically different colorations and patterns, but as long as they were selectively bred to be pets, they would likely end up looking similar.

Also, you-know-who makes another appearance. After reading this volume, I believe you'll have a faint understanding of how the overall Forthorthe arc is going to go down. It should be fun to compare your guesses to how things actually unfold, so please look forward to the coming volumes.

Oh, that's right! The other day I actually received several volumes of the Taiwanese version of *Invaders of the Rokujouma!*? The latest was volume 20. I was surprised to find out they were that far along already, and I was even more surprised to find out it came with a drama CD! It used the Japanese voices, but included a translated script. I had to wonder if that was really copacetic, but according to my editor, S-kun, the fans over there have a pretty good handle on Japanese. That was a surprise in itself. It might even mean there are some readers diving into the books directly, so hello, everyone from Taiwan! S-kun also says the Korean version is about to overtake the Taiwanese one, so hello to everyone from Korea too!

Having my work read in different countries is a very special experience. I'm interested in finding out what international readers like about the series. I'm sure there's a lot that's different from country to country and culture to culture. There might even be a difference in how we experience the seasons. I'm also curious to know which characters are popular in other countries. It's an interesting question, so I wonder if there's a way to find out. Maybe I should bug S-kun, huh? (Ha!) I'll do my best so that fans from other countries can enjoy this series as well.

There's one more thing I need to mention in regards to drama CDs. It's about

the bonus drama CD included with BOOKWALKER's digital edition. It was the first time they'd included a drama CD with a digital edition, so they didn't really know what to expect in terms of sales. There was some uncertainty about whether or not it was viable, but fortunately it far exceeded the minimum goal. There's now talk of doing more in the future.

As I'm writing this afterword toward the end of March, it's been decided that the drama CD that came with the physical copy of volume 18 will be included with the digital version of this volume. While I can't go into details here, you can find them on the official Hobby Japan and BOOKWALKER websites.

Personally, I would be happy if all four drama CDs could come out this way. I've heard a lot of people say that they missed buying the special edition of the physical release, so this is an excellent way for fans to get their hands on the CDs.

Will this way of offering the drama CDs become more widespread in the future of light novels or the subculture as a whole, I wonder? I think it'll help reduce availability issues. That said, I'm sure there are those who want the physical CD, so the physical release is always good too.

Lately one of the things I've been worrying about is that the world is changing too fast and our response to it is too delayed. A good example is that we here on the publishing side can't listen to the correct proportions of reader voices.

The majority of readers of light novels are middle and high students, and there's a handful of fans still reading into their thirties. We know that people really peter out in the late-twenties zone thanks to the questionnaires that come with related products, but I also know we're not hearing all of you. So few people actually send in the physical surveys that most of the data comes from twenty-somethings online.

Think about it. You have to use a credit card to buy ebooks in online stores, so most people who do are over 20 years old. On social networking services or review sites, many conceal their age to protect their personal information and privacy. Those folks are also usually over twenty. Moreover, since buying books frequently isn't cheap, people who buy more and spend more on books tend to fall in an older age bracket too.

So because of that, while we might be able to hear the voices of the readers from all over the internet, we aren't hearing them in the correct proportions. It is difficult to accurately know how much of which generation is saying what.

We know we should do something about that, but it's hard to come up with an immediate solution. We're working on it and discussing it, but in the meantime, we're still relying on those physical surveys you guys send in.

It's ironic we're stuck on snail mail in the digital age, but at present it's our lifeline. Submitting the surveys you have on hand won't just help us, but the entire industry. We can especially stand to learn what's introduced younger audiences to light novels. That's something we need to know to keep light novel culture going, so I hope you'll all help us out.

Now, on a bit of a personal note, I have some news to share. A different label I wrote light novels for has closed due to operation issues, so I've got quite a bit of free time on my hands these days. Of course, it's not good to lose work, so I'm currently working on a new project. If I had to give a generic label to it, it's an adventure story. The main character isn't satisfied with the life provided for them, so they leave their familiar hometown to go on a journey. From a technical standpoint, it will have the same feel as *Rokujouma!*? It'll start simple and slowly reveal its complexity. Because of various big and scary adult issues, I can't go on for too long about it. I believe I'll be able to announce more details in the future, so please be patient.

With that, I've used up all of my allotted space, so I think I'll wrap things up here this time. Last but not least, I'd like to give my usual thanks to everyone at the editing department who worked so hard, to Poco-san for all the illustrations, and to you—the readers who have stuck with me for seven years.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 23.

March 2016

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Clariosa

Whenever the children had free time, they asked Clan to show them her videos since she had hours of stockpiled footage featuring the knight in blue armor they loved so much.

“Whoa! He caught them all in the air!”

“I always drop my toys, so I want the Blue Knight to catch them for me!”

“Don’t make the Blue Knight do that!”

“But that’s what he’s doing here!”

The majority of the recordings were of mundane, everyday events. But every once in a while, the knight in question would do something that defied all logic. Like catching everything falling out of a shopping bag that had suddenly broken, or splitting into multiple versions of himself during a game of tag. His useless uses of his superhuman powers had stolen the children’s hearts.

“Hmm...”

“What is it, Myuu?”

“I was wondering something.”

Today, a certain question crossed the mind of one of the little girls watching the recordings. Though it wasn’t anything serious, once she’d had the thought, she couldn’t let it go.

“What is it?”

“Why does Clan-sama only film the Blue Knight?”

“Uh, because he’s the Blue Knight?”

“And why does she have so many of these videos organized like this?”

“Because she wants to keep watching them over and over? Like we do.”

“But Clan-sama isn’t like us. She’s an adult.”

“Hmm...”

The question at hand was why Clan had so much recorded footage of the knight in blue armor. The children could understand why she’d filmed him fighting, but most of her videos were just of the knight in blue going about his daily life. The children couldn’t understand why she’d gone to such lengths to film such humdrum things, much less why she bothered processing the footage to make it easier to watch.

“Ah, I get it!”

“Really?”

“Clan-sama is the Blue Knight’s stalker!”

“I... don’t think that’s it.”

“But the stalkers in movies are always sneaking around filming people!”

“Why don’t we just go ask Clan-sama?”

“Yeah, let’s go ask her!”

“Yeah!”

When faced with a question, the curious children sought out an answer. And today, they went running to their beloved Princess Clan to get their answer straight from the horse’s mouth.

Clan had set the children up watching videos on one half of the conference room while she sat in the back working on some research. Since she was just working on a computer, she didn’t have any problems with the children being in the same room.

“Clan-samaaa!”

“Oh, what’s the matter?”

Seeing the children run over, Clan looked up from what she was doing to the screen on the other side of the room. She figured the children must’ve hit a playback error with the video she put on for them, but nothing seemed amiss. It was still showing footage of Koutarou like it always did.

Did something happen?

Clan then looked back to the children, who had already made it over to her. After surrounding her, they cut straight to the point.

“Clan-sama, are you the Blue Knight’s stalker?!”

“Stalker?!”

The unexpected question left her practically speechless. She never dreamed she’d hear the children ask her that. In fact, she never dreamed she’d hear anyone ask her that. She was a princess, after all.

“I wanna know because you have so many videos of the Blue Knight.”

“Edited ones, too!”

“That’s why we thought you were a stalker.”

“I’m no stalker! I made sure to ask before I recorded anything!”

Realizing what was going on, Clan loudly denied the charges being brought against her. Being compared to something as unwholesome as a stalker was insulting.

“Then why do you only film the Blue Knight?”

If Clan wasn’t a stalker, that part was still a mystery. The children wanted to hear her explanation.

“Ugh...”

Clan had an answer to their question, but she couldn’t say it. It left her at a loss for words again, but that alone told the children what they needed to know.

“Oooh, so that’s why.”

“We’re sorry, Clan-sama”

“Pfft! Who said she was a stalker?”

Satisfied, the children went back to watching their videos, leaving the red-faced Clan alone.

Side: Harumi

Harumi constantly felt like her lack of aggression was holding her back, so she felt a pressing need to cultivate some.

“Okay, let’s start with this...”

She pressed a button on the remote in her hand and the disc in her player began spinning. She gulped nervously as the video started to play on screen. It was a famous film she’d rented at the store as reference material: *Mad Dax 3: Thunder Mountain*.

The story centered on a duck named Dax who travelled the land after civilization had been destroyed in an apocalyptic war. It was a legendary action movie that made the viewer question what it meant to be alive through Dax’s journey across a harsh world soiled with violence and corruption. This third installment was widely regarded as the best in the series.

“Hyahahahahaha! There’s no medicine on this mountain!”

“What?!”

“Spreading rumors like that was all a ploy to get boobs like you to gather here! And we caged all of the little birdies that showed up!”

“What about the birds who came here two weeks ago?!”

“Who cares?! Do you remember the faces of everyone you eat?!”

“YOU BASTAAARDS!”

The vile actions of the bandits on Thunder Mountain forced Dax to relive his dark past, causing him to erupt with anger. After a fierce fight that left everyone unclear as to who the real villain was, the bandits of Thunder Mountain were destroyed. But alas, the dead can never return. Dax squawked loud enough to overpower the thunder. The end.

“...Huh?”

As the end credits began rolling, Harumi regained consciousness.

“It’s already over?!”

Dumbfounded, she stared at the names scrolling by on screen. She’d actually

passed out five minutes into the movie, unable to stand the shocking content. Two hours later, she finally woke up.

“Maybe it was a little too soon for this one...”

Harumi quickly pieced together what had happened to her as she ejected the disc and returned it to its case. Afraid something like this might happen, she’d rented a second movie just in case.

“But this one should be fine!”

She put the second disc in the player and hit the play button again. Unlike the gritty action movie from before, this one was more colorful. It was a cutesy looking anime called *Up and at 'Em, Haniwamaru: Princess Sparkly of Falling Star Castle*.

The protagonist of the movie was a brave haniwa warrior named Haniwamaru. Born the prince of haniwas, he set out on a journey to make the world a better place. Everywhere he went, he put a stop to the evil ambitions of his nemesis Great Emperor Totem and the wicked clay figure Dograska.

“I said I’ll marry you, so please stop making the stars fall!”

“You fool! I never intended to keep that promise!”

“N-Nooo...”

“Not so fast, Great Emperor Totem! Return Princess Sparkly and the power of the stars at once!”

In this story, Great Emperor Totem stole the power of the stars from Falling Star Castle to blackmail Princess Sparkly. Prince Haniwamaru happened upon the treachery by coincidence and decided to save Princess Sparkly. There was a fight that led up to Haniwamaru using his special move to send Great Emperor Totem flying before eventually disappearing in the distance.

“Hmm...”

Harumi was somewhat unsatisfied after watching the movie.

“I’m not sure what to think about resolving everything with violence... He should’ve tried talking things out with them.”

She was unhappy with how swiftly Haniwamaru had resorted to force. She worried that would set a bad example for the children.

“Looks like you should give up on being more aggressive.”

Theia—who’d joined in on the movie tutoring session about halfway through *Mad Dax*—shrugged at Harumi’s mumbling.



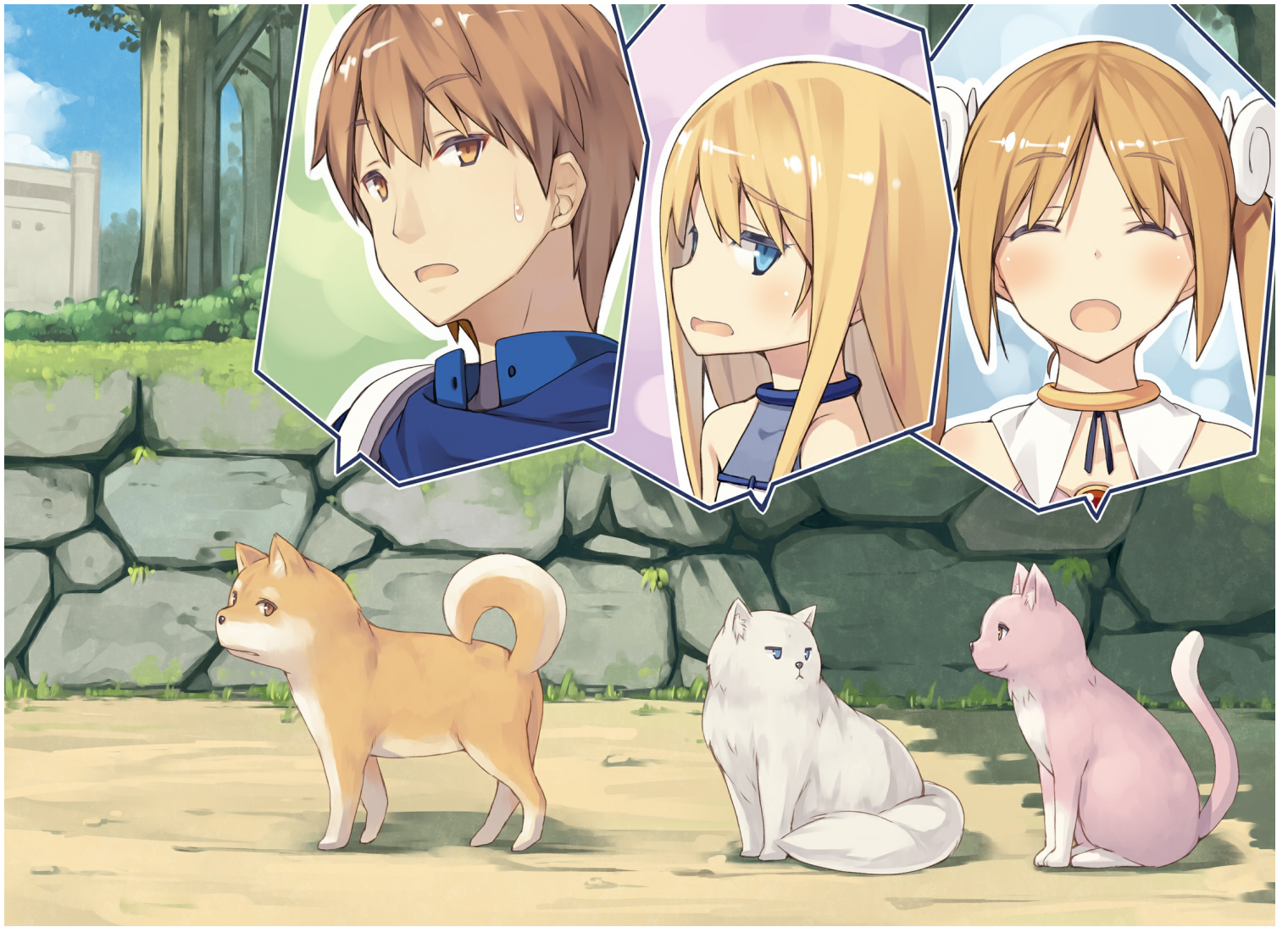






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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 22

by Takehaya

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